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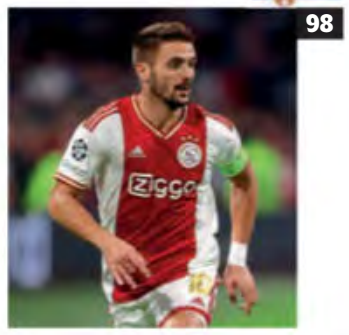

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In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

England...Erling Haaland scores an acrobatic bicycle kick in Manchester City's Premier League victory over Southampton

Spain...Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring during Real Madrid's 4-0 Copa del Rey thrashing of Barcelona at the Camp Nou

Netherlands...Ajax's Davy Klaassen reacts after being struck by an object during the Dutch Cup semi-finals

Italy...Romelu Lukaku silences the Juventus fans after receiving racist abuse during Internazionale's Coppa Italia semi-final clash in Turin

Germany...Borussia Dortmund fans celebrate during their team's 4-0 win over Eintracht Frankfurt, a result that took them top of the Bundesliga

Italy...Napoli players are jubilant after beating rivals Juventus with a stoppage-time winner

Wales...supporters invade the pitch after Wrexham seal the National League title and a return to the English Football League after a 15-year absence

Uruguay...Nacional attacker Gaston Pereiro celebrates scoring against Independiente Medellin in the Copa Libertadores

Algeria...Esperance fans during their team's African Champions League quarter-final against JS Kabylie

Japan...fans of Urawa Reds during their team's J. League clash at Kawasaki Frontale

Ecuador...two players crunch into a tackle on a rain-soaked pitch during the Copa Sudamericana group stage clash between Emelec and Huracan

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Brazil...Marcelo celebrates scoring as Fluminense beat Flamengo to win the Rio State Championship (more on page 86)

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FROM THE EDITOR

"Playmaker who arrived in Colombia with a reputation and more than lived up to it. Runs with the fluidity of the truly gifted and shows flashes of class with his left foot." That's how Tim Vickery described a 17-year-old Lionel Messi in *World Soccer*'s March 2005 edition covering the South American Under-20 Championship.

Then in December 2015, reviewing Nigeria's Under-17 World Cup triumph, Oluwashina Okeleji wrote: "The biggest star in Chile was Golden Boot and Silver Ball winner Victor Osimhen. His ten goals eclipsed the previous best mark of nine."

Football's youth championships, be it at world or confederational level, have always helped unearth generational talents, and many aspirational youngsters will be hoping to stake their claim as the next big thing at this year's Under-20 World Cup.

Tim Vickery and John Duerden preview the tournament – and cover the backstory behind its last-minute venue switch from Indonesia to Argentina – before they are joined by Mark Gleeson and Nick Bidwell in helping to identify 30 rising talents who will be hoping to follow in the footsteps of Osimhen and Messi.

> Many aspirational youngsters will be hoping to stake their claim as the next big thing at this year's Under-20 World Cup

Whereas Messi has since gone on to win it all for club and country, cementing his place as arguably the greatest footballer of all time, Osmihen is still only beginning his journey. By the time you're reading this, he will have likely fired Napoli to the Italian league title and be well on his way to adding the Serie A Golden Boot prize to that crown – mirroring his achievements at the Under-17 World Cup eight years ago. His exploits this season, which we cover in this month's player biography, have caught the attention of the world's biggest clubs, likely making him one of the summer's hottest transfer targets.

But Osimhen's story is not the only one worth telling this month. His fellow countryman Gift Orban, Italy's naturalised striker Mateo Retegui and Denmark's great new striking hope Rasmus Hojlund have all been making their own headlines, while Kecskemeti TE and SV Spakenburg have enjoyed incredible fairy-tale stories this season in Hungary and Netherlands respectively.

With a follow-up special report on multi-club ownership (we first covered the growing phenomenon in May 2021), a full preview of the OFC Champions League, dispatches from Switzerland, United States, Brazil, Lebanon and Saint Lucia, plus reviews of the CONCACAF Nations League and women's internationals ahead of the 2023 World Cup – including agonising injury news for England – there's a bit of something for everyone in this issue.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

End to gambling sponsors...West Ham United and Newcastle United are among the eight Premier League clubs with betting sponsors on the front of their shirts

ENGLAND

No more gambling sponsorship on front of Premier League shirts

Premier League clubs have agreed to end gambling sponsorship on the front of their shirts by the end of the 2025-26 campaign. Currently, eight of England's top-flight sides have betting companies on the front of their matchday shirts.

Opponents of gambling advertising welcomed the move, but argued that more needs to be done. Clubs will still be able to pursue sponsorship between now and the deadline, while the ban has no effect on sleeve sponsors or advertising boards within stadiums.

The Big Step, an organisation that campaigns for an end to all forms of gambling advertising and sponsorship within football, described the ban as "a significant acceptance of the harm caused by gambling sponsorship," but that "just moving logos to a different part of the kit while allowing pitch-side advertising and league sponsorship to continue is totally incoherent."

Their statement added: "Without government action on all forms of gambling ads in football, at every level, online casinos will exploit any voluntary measures and continue to market their products through our national sport. Although this outcome isn't perfect, it's a huge step."

For now, the ban is likely to be restricted to the Premier League. The EFL, which is sponsored by SkyBet, has previously said that gambling sponsorship brings its members £40m a year each, while the Scottish Professional Football League told *BBC Scotland* that "individual sponsorships are a matter for each club."

"Justice has been done and this sends out a great message to the whole world of sport and beyond. This has shown that the desire is there to fight racism"

Romelu Lukaku on having his one-match ban overturned by the Italian Football Federation in a bid to fight racism

UEFA

UEFA launches advisory board

A new panel of senior football figures, including high-profile coaches and ex-players, met for the first time at the end of April. UEFA says the board has been formed in order to provide a "voice of experience and expertise on fundamental football-related topics, including the Laws of the Game, refereeing, match calendar, elite youth development and player well-being", with the membership "selected based on their outstanding club or national team football achievements, impeccable international reputation and extensive experience."

The 24-man panel featured the likes of Jose Mourinho, Carlo Ancelotti, Zinedine Zidane, Petr Cech, Gareth Bale and Luis Figo, with handball, VAR, player behaviour and medical football matters on the agenda for the first meeting.

UK & REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Stadiums for Euro 2028 bid confirmed

The combined bid from the UK and Republic of Ireland to stage Euro 2028 has confirmed which stadiums form part of its proposal.

From the original shortlist of 14, Manchester United's Old Trafford, the Stadium of Light in Sunderland, West Ham's London Stadium and Croke Park in Dublin have been dropped, with the final ten including two unbuilt stadiums: Everton's Goodison Park replacement at Bramley-Moore Dock and Casement Park in Belfast.

The only other bid to host the finals is from Turkey, with a decision expected in September.

Full list:

• Aviva Stadium (Dublin) • Casement Park (Belfast) • Etihad Stadium (Manchester) • Everton Stadium (Liverpool) • Hampden Park (Glasgow) • Principality Stadium (Cardiff) • St James' Park (Newcastle) • Tottenham Hotspur Stadium (London) • Villa Park (Birmingham) • Wembley Stadium (London)

Unbuilt... Everton's new ground is due to be finished next year

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month...

Youth League champions...AZ

1
UEFA titles won by AZ Alkmaar, after the Dutch club's Under-19s lifted the Youth League, thrashing Hajduk Split 5-0 in the final.

15
Serie A points restored to Juventus after their deduction for allegations of false accounting was reversed. Their case will now return to the Italian Football Federation appeals court.

3
Premier League Player of the Month awards won by Marcus Rashford this season, matching Mohamed Salah's record for a single campaign.

$355m
Value of payments that clubs will receive from FIFA in exchange for releasing their players for the next two World Cups, an increase of almost 70 per cent on Qatar 2022.

2
Managers that are now in the Premier League Hall of Fame following the inductions of Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger.

178
Number of WSL appearances made by Tottenham Hotspur defender Kerys Harrop to break the competition's all-time record.

12
Matches Mexican referee Fernando Hernandez was suspended for after kneeing a player in the groin during the clash between America and Leon.

1.5m
Number of tickets that are expected to be sold for the upcoming Women's World Cup.

237
Games it took Kevin De Bruyne to reach 100 Premier League assists, the fewest in history.

1
Number of Asian players with 100 Premier League goals after Son Heung-min reached the tally in April for Tottenham Hotspur.

15
Years and 285 days, the age of Barcelona's Lamine Yamal when he was called into their first team – the club's youngest-ever squad member.

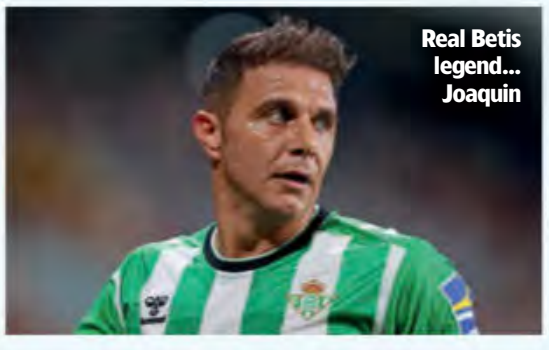
6
Games New York Red Bulls forward Dante Vanzeir was suspended for after he was found guilty of using a racist remark in the MLS clash against San Jose Earthquakes.

14
Premier League managers sacked this season following the departure of Cristian Stellini from Spurs, a new league record for one campaign.

2
Number of times Peru have had hosting rights for the U17 World Cup taken away after FIFA stripped them of the 2023 competition due to the country's inability to complete infrastructure.

171
Stadium bans and fines handed out to Juventus fans by police after Romelu Lukaku suffered racist abuse at the home of the Turin giants.

42
Age Real Betis legend Joaquin will turn this summer after he announced plans to finally retire at the end of the season.



Real Betis legend... Joaquin

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

FIFPro's voice in the wilderness

Sisyphus, in Greek mythology, was condemned by the gods to push a boulder up a hill and then repeat the task eternally after it always tumbled back down just as he was about to reach the top. In football terms for Sisyphus read FIFPro.

The world players' association has been railing for much of the last three decades about the inequitable burden on its members. These range from the indignity of being treated like cattle in the transfer market to, most important, the health-battering ever-escalating pressure of fixtures.

FIFPro has long called for better management of player workload by clubs, leagues and governing bodies to ensure the health and well-being of players.

Every time the issue of fixture congestion has been raised, the custom for FIFA presidents has been to point to a variety of health studies enshrouded by negotiations with the ever-widening band of "stakeholders".

FIFPro is one of those stakeholders. Trouble is, FIFPro is merely one solo voice continually being out-sung by the symphonic variations of television, sponsors, leagues and clubs. Club coaches complain but only about the concertina of match-staging dates, never about the wider issue.

The World Cup provides the perfect platform for FIFPro to raise its complaints and concerns about physical and mental fatigue, injuries and burn-out. But amid all the excitement of the forthcoming finals no one ever wants to listen. In any case, the finals last only a month. Only four of the teams play from start to finish, so who cares?

This time around, FIFPro organised a survey of 64 players who had seen World Cup action in Qatar. Some 54 per cent reported an injury or felt more likely to suffer one this season; 44 per cent said they were experiencing "extreme or increased physical fatigue"; and 20 per cent were feeling "extremely high levels of mental and emotional fatigue".

Exhausted...FIFPro say the current schedules are pushing players beyond their limits

A majority criticised a lack of sufficient time to prepare tactics with their national team before the finals and then pressure to rush back into full-scale club football too soon afterwards. One, understandably anonymous, described the abrupt return as "practically suicide".

FIFPro's report claimed that the out-of-the-blue increase in World Cup match stoppage time of 11.6 seconds would, if applied worldwide, equate to an extra three full matches per season for an elite player.

Advisor Darren Burgess, former head of fitness at both Arsenal and Liverpool, said: "Fatigue creates mental stress, injuries and poor performance, none of which anyone in or around the game wants to see. This is not only my view based on years of experience but also the finding of a growing body of scientific research. Competition organisers need to be far more aware of how factors like mental stress and recovery time affect players."

These "competition organisers" will have a perfect opportunity to raise awareness – or, most likely, look the other way – over the rest of the decade.

Consider the forthcoming schedule for elite players. This year, alongside the club calendar, European football has the finals of the UEFA Nations League in June, CONCACAF stages the Gold Cup from June 16 to July 16, before the FIFA Women's World Cup picks up the international game's

bandwidth from July 20 to August 20. Autumn brings the men's national team windows from September 4 to 12, October 9 to 17 and November 13 to 21.

Next year, 2024, will be intense with regional championship finals in four of the six confederations. The AFC's Asian Cup (January 12 to February 10) immediately precedes CAF's Africa Cup of Nations (January 13 to February 11) with UEFA's Euros and, across the Atlantic, CONMEBOL's Copa America simultaneously running from June 14 to July 14.

In 2025 a further CONCACAF Gold Cup is scheduled for June and July, plus the intriguing addition of the 32-team FIFA Club World Cup (assuming everything falls into place for Gianni Infantino's long-delayed pet project). Then 2026 opens a new chapter in FIFA World Cup history with the expanded five-week, 48-team, 104-match World Cup finals in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

FIFA president Infantino pointed out that he had scrapped the four-yearly Confederations Cup to make room for the newly-expanded Club World Cup. But the annual Europe-South America Finalissima will continue going forward.

No wonder FIFPro is worried as never before.

The organisation's general secretary, Jonas Baer-Hoffmann, said: "Our research provides new evidence of the excessive demands on elite players. We are observing a growing awareness among players about the harmful effects these pressures have on their performance, careers and personal lives.

"They realise their match calendar is not sustainable, affects their mental and physical health, and leaves them exposed, and without any protection, to an accelerated cycle of poorly coordinated competitions."

Baer-Hoffmann is as frustrated as his long-serving predecessor Hans van Seggelen was that the decision-makers prioritise "commercial objectives over the basic health and safety of elite players." He added: "Expanded competition formats underline the growing cannibalisation of the match calendar...we are extremely worried players will continue to be the last consideration in forthcoming decisions."

> "Fatigue creates mental stress, injuries and poor performance, none of which anyone in or around the game wants to see"
>
> Darren Burgess, FIFPro's high-performance advisor

Worried? Baer-Hoffmann can be absolutely certain about it because no change is in sight in the leadership of the world game. This means not only FIFA but the six regional confederations whose presidents join Infantino in making up what is known as the "FIFA Bureau". It is steady as you go in the corridors of power where calendars are being stuffed as full as possible.

This year has seen not only Infantino's re-election for a further four years as FIFA president but similar stability – or self-serving indulgence, depending on your viewpoint – imitated by no fewer than five of the six confederations. The incumbent presidents of UEFA, CONMEBOL, AFC, CONCACAF and OFC have all secured four-year terms within the last 13 months.

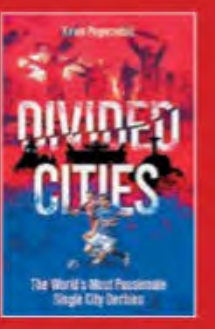
Only Africa may buck the trend; Patrice Motsepe swept to power at CAF in 2021 with the powerful support of Infantino, but has done little to hint that he will stray from his promise to be a one-term president.

So FIFPro cannot expect any serious traction from the bosses. So what to do? FIFPro is not a trade union that can call its members out on strike. The immediate interest of elite players is as many matches as possible to maximise their direct and indirect earning potential. And can you blame them? One bad fall, one crazy tackle and their career is over.

Good luck to FIFPro. The issue is crucial. But it needs to bring superstars of the status of a Messi, Ronaldo, Mbappe or Modric to light up the message. Otherwise it can push the boulder all the way up to the peak of the 2026 World Cup... then watch it roll all the way back down to the Canadian, Mexican and American foothills.

FIFPro general secretary...Jonas Baer-Hoffmann

BOOKS THIS MONTH



DIVIDED CITIES
By Kevin Pogorzelski (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Rivalry is everywhere in football, from battles on the pitch to boardroom politics, regional quarrels and fights for silverware. These conflicts spark countless debates over the "biggest" and "best" fixtures on the globe, but derbies involving teams from the same city are especially intense, both on and off the pitch. *Divided Cities* is a game-by-game account of the good, bad, but always eventful experiences of journeying to 11 of the world's most prominent same-city derbies.

A NATION AGAIN
By Andy Bargh (Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

A Nation Again is the absorbing, revealing tale of the Scotland men's team's return to a major tournament after more than 20 years in the wilderness. Ten major tournaments had come and gone since France '98, but the birth of UEFA's Nations League offered a new route to glory. Steve Clarke took on the challenge of inspiring a team rooted in failure, and from the lowest of lows came the highest of highs.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Nagelsmann's European shortcomings cost him his job

On the face of it, applying any logic that has applied in the first 160 years of football's existence, there is something absurd about Julian Nagelsmann being sacked by Bayern Munich having lost just three of 36 games this season. He won the league last season and had won eight out of eight in the Champions League this season – a run that includes pairs of wins over Inter, Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain. Nagelsmann and various players spoke of their "shock" at the club's decision.

And that's reasonable enough. This was not, in any sense, a normal sacking. But then the Bundesliga is no longer a normal league. Nagelsmann had just seen Bayern slip into second, behind Borussia Dortmund, after a defeat to Bayer Leverkusen. When your revenue is 83 per cent greater than that of your nearest rival (according to the latest *Deloitte* report into football finance) even being challenged domestically is perhaps sack-able. Everything, in the end, comes down to Europe. And the calculation that Bayern's board appear to have made is that Nagelsmann is not the man to deliver them the Champions League trophy.

Dismissed...Julian Nagelsmann

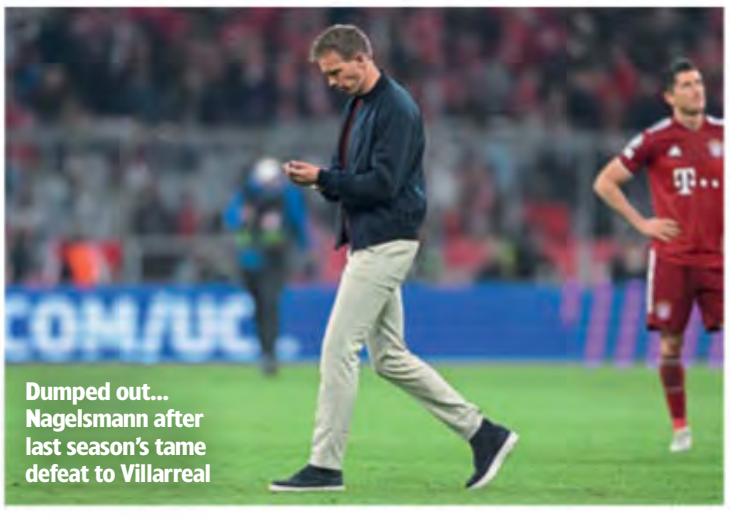
> The calculation that Bayern Munich's board appear to have made is that Nagelsmann is not the man to deliver them the Champions League trophy

The scepticism about Nagelsmann is understandable. He is, it should be said, clearly an extremely talented coach. Aged just 28, he took over Hoffenheim when they seemed doomed to relegation and saved them. The following season he took them to fourth and the season after that to third. Those are startling achievements.

But in the Champions League, they failed. Hoffenheim lost 6-3 on aggregate to Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool in a play-off in 2017-18 and in the group stage the following season they failed to win a single game. The following season, Nagelsmann's first at RB Leipzig, was rather better. Having got through the group stage, they comfortably beat Tottenham over two legs in the last 16 before the COVID-enforced one-legged finale in Lisbon. Atletico Madrid were beaten easily enough, but then came a tame semi-final defeat to PSG.

That could still be portrayed as a young coach leading an unfancied team against the grandees of the game, but the pattern started to become worrying. The following season Leipzig were well beaten in the last 16 of the Champions League by Liverpool, having lost a group game 5-0 at Manchester United. The season after that Bayern were dumped out of the Champions League in the quarter-finals by Villarreal.

Taken individually, each defeat is explicable. The sample size, almost inevitably, is small. Perhaps only Bayern's game against Villarreal is a tie Nagelsmann would have expected to win. But each defeat seemed timid. And perhaps this



Dumped out... Nagelsmann after last season's tame defeat to Villarreal

is the main issue with the present generation of high-pressing German or Bundesliga-adjacent coaches, that any deviation from that high-octane philosophy feels somehow cowardly. Perhaps it's the problem with all coaches who espouse a philosophy, that attempts to moderate the style can seem like a loss of faith.

But something similar happened even in victory over PSG this season. Bayern won 1-0 in Paris and 2-0 in Munich. Other than the final 25 minutes or so of the first leg, after Kylian Mbappe had come off the bench, it was a comfortable enough victory – even if it did take until the 61st minute of the second leg for them to go 2-0 up.

Perhaps it's unreasonable to be critical after a straightforward win, but there was a thought towards the end of the first leg and in the first half of the second that Bayern had missed an opportunity. PSG were dreadful before half-time in the first leg, their 4-4-2 weirdly stretched so that Bayern dominated utterly in the centre. A more ruthless side, or a coach more confident in reading the emotional flow of the game, would surely have at least tried to finish PSG off early on, rather than patiently protecting possession. For a side as used to winning as Bayern, the manner of a win makes a difference.

By the time of that game, Nagelsmann had already reportedly fallen out with a number of senior figures at the club, both in the dressing room and outside. Bayern, fearing that Tottenham might poach Thomas Tuchel from under their noses, were forced to act.

Which leaves Nagelsmann, at 35, at a crossroads. But as he responds to losing the job he always desired, and contemplates possible approaches from Real Madrid and Tottenham, perhaps the most important aspect he needs to change is to start getting results in Europe and to find a decisiveness, whether that comes from a high press or a moderated approach.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Renewed rivalry ...Australia and New Zealand's men played a two-match series last September

1 FROM THE ASHES

When you hear "The Ashes" in a sporting context, it usually refers to the cricketing rivalry between England and Australia. Yet it also describes the footballing grudge match between the Aussies and their nearest neighbours New Zealand. Between 1923 and 1954, the two countries' football teams competed for a small wooden casket of ashes whenever they met, but since then the casket has been missing – until now. In April, the grandchildren of a former Australian Soccer Football Association secretary recovered the Anzac Soccer Ashes trophy, sparking hopes it can become a part of the teams' regular calendar again. "This is a legendary trophy in Australian and New Zealand football history," said Andrew Pragnell, CEO of New Zealand Football. "With the co-hosted FIFA Women's World Cup this year, and All Whites and Ford Football Ferns games against Australia last year, there has never been a better time for us to collaborate with Football Australia." While the cricketing urn is famously said to contain the ashes of a burnt cricket bail, the football equivalent refers to the remains of cigars smoked by the two captains after a match in 1923.

2 HOW LONG, REF?

To say that Bolivian football has had difficulty in implementing VAR would be a big understatement. In 2019, one referee almost caused a riot after awarding a penalty whilst indicating the VAR signal with his arms – despite the system not being in use at the time. Last campaign, the season's kick-off was delayed by a week due to problems implementing VAR, and while it is up and running now, many of those involved must wish they hadn't bothered. During a weekend in March, huge amounts of stoppage time were added on in several matches as refs struggled to get to grips with the system. Real Santa Cruz and The Strongest saw ten minutes added on at the end of their game, Gaubira beat Royal Pari thanks to a penalty in the eighth minute of first-half stoppage time, while Jonatan Cristaldo missed a spot-kick for Oriente Petrolero in minute 11 of added time. But that was nothing compared to Palmaflor v Blooming, where 42 minutes were added on at the end of the game after the officials reportedly took 17 minutes to make a decision over one of the goals. The players made sure to pack in plenty of stoppage-time drama though, with two goals scored and two players sent off, while the referee in charge of the chaos was suspended.

3 PHONING IT IN

Meanwhile, in the Egyptian second tier, another referee was suspended after using a video on a spectator's phone to overturn a decision. VAR is not in operation in the league, but that didn't stop one official from consulting the footage and ruling out a goal for handball. He then needed police protection as he left the pitch amid protests from players and fans.

4 FULL MOON

Supporters of Ligue 1 outfit Angers have had to resort to extreme measures to help their team. Rooted to the bottom of the table, they are certain to be playing in the second tier next season. Unsurprisingly, few fans made the eight-hour round trip to follow the team to Clermont, but those that did tried to make a difference when the hosts were awarded two first-half penalties. Both times, a section of the away end tried to distract the takers with a good old-fashioned mooning. Sadly for them, the tactic failed on both occasions, and Angers lost 2-1.

Desperate times...Angers supporters moon the players while their opponents Clermont prepare to take a penalty

"The football calendar is getting fuller and busier. If I'm honest with myself, I have to come to the conclusion that this is having more and more impact"

Netherlands striker Vincent Janssen explains his decision to retire from international football

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

Back at the Bridge ...Frank Lampard

Permanent move ...Moise Kean

EUROPE

In the Premier League, **FRANK LAMPARD** was appointed Chelsea's caretaker manager after Graham Potter was fired, while Leicester City named **DEAN SMITH** as their new boss following the departure of Brendan Rodgers. In the Championship, Watford hired **CHRIS WILDER** to replace Slaven Bilic, just over five months after the Croatian arrived at Vicarage Road.

Brentford captain **PONTUS JANSSON** announced that he will re-join his first club Malmo on a free transfer in the summer.

In Germany, Bundesliga strugglers Stuttgart and Hertha Berlin both hired new coaches: **SEBASTIAN HOENESS** to replace the outgoing Bruno Labbadia and **PAL DARDAI** to replace Sandro Schwarz, respectively.

In Spain, three clubs towards the bottom of La Liga changed managers: Elche hired **SEBASTIAN BECCACECE** to replace Pablo Machin, **LUIS GARCIA** took charge of Espanyol in place of Diego Martinez, and Real Valladolid moved for **PAULO PEZZOLANO** after firing Pacheta.

Juventus completed the permanent transfer of Italy striker **MOISE KEAN** after the 23-year-old spent the last two seasons on loan in Turin from Premier League side Everton.

Former Turkey, Galatasaray, Atletico Madrid and Barcelona winger **ARDA TURAN** began his managerial career by taking charge of Eyupspor in the Turkish second tier.

RIK DE MIL was promoted from assistant manager to head coach at Club Brugge following the sacking of Scott Parker.

The experienced **AGE HAREIDE**, former national team coach of Norway and Denmark, took charge of Iceland after Arnar Vidarsson left the role.

Vitoria Guimaraes winger **MIKEY JOHNSTON**, on loan from Celtic, switched his international allegiance from Scotland to Republic of Ireland.

ASIA

Al Nassr hired **DINKO JELICIC** to replace Rudi Garcia as coach, despite the Cristiano Ronaldo-led club lying second in the Saudi Pro League.

Iran finally appointed a successor to Carlos Queiroz, with **AMIR GHALENOEI** arriving as national team head coach.

China international attacking midfielder **ELKESON** returned to the country from Gremio to sign for Chengdu Rongcheng. Elsewhere in China, Beijing Guoan signed Cameroon international centre-back **MICHAEL NGADEU** from Gent, ex-Norwich City midfielder **IBRAHIM AMADOU** joined Shanghai Shenhua, and former Brighton striker **JURGEN LOCADIA** moved to Cangzhou Mighty Lions.

CONCACAF

In Major League Soccer, D.C. United captured midfielder **LEWIS O'BRIEN** on loan from Nottingham Forest, Inter Miami signed Canada international **KAMAL MILLER** from CF Montreal

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

World Cup hero... Germany fans pay tribute to Ozil at the 2022 World Cup

EUROPE

Germany's World Cup-winning midfielder **MESUT OZIL** announced his retirement after a disappointing two years in Turkey with Fenerbahce and Istanbul Basaksehir. Former Croatia right-back **SIME VRSALJKO** and one-time Barcelona wonderkid **BOJAN KRKIC** also ended their playing careers.

ANTONIO CONTE left Tottenham Hotspur by mutual consent, leaving his former assistant **CRISTIAN STELLINI** in caretaker charge, before he too was later dismissed and replaced by Ryan Mason until the end of the season.

Wales lost two more of their most experienced players after midfielder **JONNY WILLIAMS** and full-back **CHRIS GUNTER** retired from international duty, the latter winning 109 caps for his country. Elsewhere, 28-year-old Netherlands striker **VINCENT JANSSEN** also quit international football.

Wales legends... Chris Gunter and Jonny Williams

In Scotland, Hearts sacked **ROBBIE NEILSON**, and **CALLUM DAVIDSON** departed St Johnstone.

In the Championship, Reading and Blackpool parted company with **PAUL INCE** and **MICK McCARTHY** respectively.

Olympiakos terminated the contract of Colombia attacking midfielder **JAMES RODRIGUEZ** less than a year after signing him.

Free agent... James Rodriguez

Ligue 1 strugglers Angers parted way with their second manager of the season, **ABDEL BOUHAZAMA**.

The men's World Cup's all-time top goalscorer **MIROSLAV KLOSE**

"I spoke to Antoine because he was disappointed and frankly it is understandable…I told him that as long as I am captain and he is vice-captain, I won't be superior to him"

Kylian Mbappe responds to reports that Antoine Griezmann was disappointed not to be appointed France captain

and ex-Leeds United midfielder **MATEUSZ BOGUSZ** joined LAFC.

SOUTH AMERICA

Spanish coach **FELIX SANCHEZ** took charge of Ecuador, having been sacked by Qatar following the World Cup.

Argentine coach **JORGE SAMPAOLI** took over at Flamengo, a month after being sacked by Sevilla.

Palmeiras signed winger **ARTUR** from Red Bull Bragantino, Atletico Mineiro snapped up midfielder **RODRIGO BATTAGLIA** from Mallorca, and Chile international **CHARLES ARANGUIZ** re-joined Internacional, eight years after leaving the Brazilian club for Bayer Leverkusen.

Brazil return… Jorge Sampaoli

had his first managerial spell brought to a premature end after leaving Austrian side Altach.

AFRICA

Former Togo, Arsenal, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur striker **EMMANUEL ADEBAYOR** announced his retirement. His last club was AC Semassi in his home country.

SOUTH AMERICA

Sao Paulo sacked **ROGERIO CENI**, their legendary long-serving former goalkeeper, as manager after his second spell in charge. Meanwhile, in Argentina, Boca Juniors parted company with head coach **HUGO IBARRA**.

OBITUARIES

LEFT: Tough tackler …Colquhoun during his West Brom days

Eddie COLQUHOUN (1945-2023)
A Scotland international of 11 caps, the tough-tackling centre-half spent the bulk of his playing career in England with Bury, West Bromwich Albion and, most notably, Sheffield United, where he played 433 games in ten years. He ended his career in the North American Soccer League, representing Detroit Express and Washington Diplomats.

Don MEGSON (1936-2023)
Left-back Megson played 442 games for Sheffield Wednesday, placing him seventh on their all-time appearances list. After retiring he managed Bristol Rovers, NASL side Portland Timbers and Bournemouth, while his son Gary went on to manage the likes of West Brom, Bolton Wanderers and Wednesday.

Jason TURNER (1973-2023)
The chief executive of National League side Notts County passed away suddenly in March aged 50.

Luis MARQUEZ (1971-2023)
A Real Betis legend, who played over 200 games for the club and helped them win promotion to La Liga back in 1993-94.

Mabo ISMAILA (1944-2023)
As coach of the Nigerian women's team, Ismaila took them to the 1999 World Cup, as well as the 2000 and 2004 Olympics.

Italo GALBIATI (1937-2023)
Fabio Capello's former assistant at Roma, Milan, Juventus, Real Madrid and England.

Alan JONES (1945-2023)
The Welshman played 363 games for Hereford United, including their famous FA Cup victory over Newcastle in 1972.

Marker…Schaefer (L) jumps for a header with Gerd Muller

Knapp…from his playing days at Southampton

Three Lions assistant… Galbiati with England legend Wayne Rooney

Mimis PAPAIOANNOU (1942-2023)
One of Greece's greatest-ever footballers, Papaioannou scored almost 300 goals in over 500 games for AEK Athens, as well as another 21 in 61 caps for his country. In 1965 he almost joined Real Madrid after being scouted by Ferenc Puskas, but the Spanish club's offer was rejected.

Manfred SCHAEFER (1943-2023)
Born in Germany, Schaefer moved to Australia aged 11 and won 49 Socceroos caps between 1967 and 1974, including all three games at the 1974 World Cup where he marked Gerd Muller in the match against the West German hosts.
Mark Gleeson

Petar NADOVEZA (1942-2023)
Dubbed "the Pele from Split", Nadoveza is one of the highest scorers in Hajduk Split's history with 123 goals. He won the Golden Boot as the club won the Yugoslav league title in 1970-71, and later returned to manage them, winning the Croatian league title in 2003-04.

Sergio GORI (1946-2023)
One of the stars of the Cagliari side that won its first and only *Scudetto* in 1969-70.

Tony KNAPP (1936-2023)
After a playing career that featured spells at Leicester, Southampton, Coventry City, Los Angeles Wolves and Tranmere Rovers, Knapp worked as a coach in Scandinavia from the mid-1970s onwards, coaching Iceland and a host of Norwegian clubs.

Josep Maria FUSTE (1941-2023)
Barcelona captain in the 1960s and early '70s, Fuste helped the club win two Inter-Cities Fairs Cups as well as three Copas del Rey. The midfielder was also part of Spain's victorious 1964 Euros squad.

Willie BELL (1937-2023)
A regular in Don Revie's Leeds United team of the 1960s, the twice-capped Scotland left-back also played for Queen's Park, Leicester City and Brighton.

Birger JENSEN (1951-2023)
Denmark goalkeeper who was a cult hero at Belgium's Club Brugge, for whom he played from 1974 to 1988, including the 1978 European Cup final loss to Liverpool.
Mark Gleeson

"You have to work with what you have. You wouldn't say as a five-year-old at Christmas you want a Ferrari…there are moments when you have to accept it's not possible"

Jurgen Klopp discusses Jude Bellingham after reports emerged Liverpool would not pursue a move for the England midfielder

Evan FERGUSON

(Brighton & Hove Albion)

Ferguson has been on the radar of Irish fans ever since he played his first senior game for Bohemians in a friendly against Chelsea at the age of 14, helping to set up a goal with a neat stepover. He signed for Brighton in January 2021 and, after racking up the goals in academy football, has been a key addition to the Seagulls' attack this season.

Still only 18 years of age, his maturity and development are remarkable. The striker's composure, intelligent movement and decision-making belie his tender years. France skipper Kylian Mbappe spoke of Ferguson ahead of *Les Bleus'* Euro 2024 qualifier against Republic of Ireland, while the Irishman was sorely missed in Brighton's FA Cup semi-final defeat to Manchester United.

It has often been suggested that Brighton only need to sign a top-class centre-forward to compete for a Champions League spot. Yet if Ferguson continues to improve, they may already have that player.

QR CORNER

Meet Jason Kissi, the non-league footballer with the longest throw in football.

Use a tablet or smartphone to scan the QR code

Kendry PAEZ
(Independiente del Valle)
The latest young star to emerge from the Ecuadorian club's outstanding youth academy, the 16-year-old forward will reportedly join Chelsea for €20 million when he turns 18 in 2025.

Luka VUSKOVIC
(Hajduk Split)
One of the stars of the side that reached the final of the UEFA Youth League, the 16-year-old centre-back is attracting interest from all over Europe.

Hugo LARSSON
(Malmo)
The 18-year-old, already a full Sweden international, admitted he turned down a January move to Bournemouth, citing the "big step" between the Swedish top flight and the Premier League.

Sontje HANSEN
(Ajax)
The striker won the Golden Boot in the Netherlands' Euro U17-winning campaign of 2019, but is out of contract this summer and attracting interest.

LEE Kang-in
(Mallorca)
In Mallorca's recent 3-1 win over Getafe, their playmaker – who is a reported target for several Premier League clubs – became the first Korean to score a La Liga brace.

Ousmane DIOMANDE
(Sporting)
The defender was so impressive on loan at Portuguese second-tier side Mafra in the first half of the season that Sporting signed him from Midtjylland for €7.5m – and he has continued to impress.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

MARCH 2023

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	14
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	13
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	7
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	6
David de Gea (Manchester United)	5
Alex Meret (Napoli)	5
Mike Maignan (Milan)	4
Yann Sommer (Bayern Munich)	4
Alisson (Liverpool)	3
Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG)	3
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Chelsea)	2
Diogo Costa (Porto)	2
Ederson (Manchester City)	2
Nick Pope (Newcastle United)	2
Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)	2
Rafal Gikiewicz (Augsburg)	1
Bernd Leno (Fulham)	1
Simon Mignolet (Club Brugge)	1
Juan Musso (Atalanta)	1
Andre Onana (Internazionale)	1
Rui Patricio (Roma)	1
Frederik Ronnow (Union Berlin)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Ajax)	1
Brice Samba (Lens)	1
Kevin Trapp (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Robin Zentner (Mainz)	1

DEFENDERS

Kim Min-jae (Napoli)	28
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	17
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	14
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	13
Joao Cancelo (Bayern Munich)	12
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	11
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	10
Gabriel (Arsenal)	10
Josko Gvardiol (RB Leipzig)	9
Nathan Ake (Manchester City)	8
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	8
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	7
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	7
Oleksandr Zinchenko (Arsenal)	7
Jordi Alba (Barcelona)	6
Danilho Doekhi (Union Berlin)	6
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	6
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	6
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	6
William Saliba (Arsenal)	6
Danilo (Juventus)	5
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	5
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	4
Matthijs de Ligt (Bayern Munich)	4
Alex Grimaldo (Benfica)	4
Mario Rui (Napoli)	4
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Diogo Dalot (Manchester United)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Eric Dier (Tottenham)	3
Lisandro Martinez (Manchester United)	3
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	3
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	3
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	3
Marcos Acuna (Sevilla)	2
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	2
Sven Botman (Newcastle United)	2
Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	2
Sergino Dest (Milan)	2
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	2
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Roger Ibanez (Roma)	2
Marquinhos (PSG)	2
Chancel Mbemba (Marseille)	2
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	2
Amir Rrahmani (Napoli)	2
Romain Saiss (Besiktas)	2
Fabian Schar (Newcastle United)	2
Leonardo Spinazzola (Roma)	2
John Stones (Manchester City)	2
Nuno Tavares (Marseille)	2
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	2
Ben White (Arsenal)	2
Manuel Akanji (Manchester City)	1
Toby Alderweireld (Antwerp)	1
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	1
Alexander Bah (Benfica)	1
Rodrigo Becao (Udinese)	1
Ramy Bensebaini (Borussia M'Gladbach)	1
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	1
Bremer (Juventus)	1
Dan Burn (Newcastle United)	1
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	1
Dante (Nice)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Bilbao)	1
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	1
Nico Elvedi (Borussia M'Gladbach)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich)	1
Paul Jaeckel (Union Berlin)	1
Reece James (Chelsea)	1
Pierre Kalulu (Milan)	1
Kalidou Koulibaly (Chelsea)	1
Diogo Leite (Union Berlin)	1
Tyrell Malacia (Manchester United)	1
Noussair Mazraoui (Bayern Munich)	1
Ben Mee (Brentford)	1
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Cesar Montes (Espanyol)	1
Gonzalo Montiel (Sevilla)	1
Daniel Munoz (Genk)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Red Bull Salzburg)	1
Alfonso Pedraza (Villarreal)	1
Diego Rico (Real Sociedad)	1
Alessio Romagnoli (Lazio)	1
Cristian Romero (Tottenham)	1
Emerson Royal (Tottenham)	1
Alex Sandro (Juventus)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Luke Shaw (Manchester United)	1
Antonio Silva (Benfica)	1
Niklas Sule (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Malick Thiaw (Milan)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Raphael Varane (Manchester United)	1
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	1
Aaron Wan-Bissaka (Manchester United)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	26
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	24
Pedri (Barcelona)	16
Casemiro (Manchester United)	14
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	14
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	11
Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund)	10
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	9
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	9
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	9
Aurelien Tchouameni (Real Madrid)	7
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	6
Sofyan Amrabat (Fiorentina)	5
Gavi (Barcelona)	5
Julian Brandt (Borussia Dortmund)	4
Adrien Rabiot (Juventus)	4
Rodri (Manchester City)	4
Granit Xhaka (Arsenal)	4
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	3
Piotr Zielinski (Napoli)	3
Sergio Busquets (Barcelona)	2
Przemyslaw Frankowski (Lens)	2
Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	2
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Tottenham)	2
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	2
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	2
Alexis Mac Allister (Brighton)	2
Joao Mario (Benfica)	2
Scott McTominay (Manchester United)	2
Thomas Partey (Arsenal)	2
Marco Verratti (PSG)	2
Martin Zubimendi (Real Sociedad)	2
Leandro Barreiro (Mainz)	1

Benjamin Bourigeaud (Rennes)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Eduardo Camavinga (Real Madrid)	1
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	1
Angel Di Maria (Juventus)	1
Brahim Diaz (Milan)	1
Christian Eriksen (Manchester United)	1
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	1
Jorginho (Arsenal)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Mohammed Kudus (Ajax)	1
Sergej Milinkovic-Savic (Lazio)	1
Azzedine Ounahi (Marseille)	1
Roberto Pereyra (Udinese)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (RB Leipzig)	1
Thiago (Liverpool)	1
Vitinha (PSG)	1
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	1

FORWARDS

Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	50
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	30
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	26
Lionel Messi (PSG)	24
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Napoli)	22
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	19
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	18
Marcus Rashford (Manchester United)	17
Neymar (PSG)	8
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	6
Aleksandar Mitrovic (Fulham)	6
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	6
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	5
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	5
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Gabriel Martinelli (Arsenal)	3
Enner Valencia (Fenerbahce)	3
Sheraldo Becker (Union Berlin)	2
Kingsley Coman (Bayern Munich)	2
Ousmane Dembele (Barcelona)	2
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	2
Gabriel Jesus (Arsenal)	2
Randal Kolo Muani (Eintracht Frankfurt)	2
Rafael Leao (Milan)	2
Sadio Mane (Bayern Munich)	2
Eddie Nketiah (Arsenal)	2
Lois Openda (Lens)	2
Raphinha (Barcelona)	2
Marco Reus (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Cristiano Ronaldo (Al Nassr)	2
Rafa Silva (Benfica)	2
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	2
Sofiane Boufal (Al Rayyan)	1
Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting (Bayern Munich)	1
Olivier Giroud (Milan)	1
Sebastien Haller (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Vincent Janssen (Antwerp)	1
Jesper Lindstrom (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Romelu Lukaku (Internazionale)	1
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton)	1
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	1
Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)	1
Dani Olmo (RB Leipzig)	1
Paul Onuachu (Southampton)	1
Dango Ouattara (Bournemouth)	1
Ivan Perisic (Tottenham)	1
Richarlison (Tottenham)	1
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	1
Alexis Sanchez (Marseille)	1
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	1
Martin Terrier (Rennes)	1
Ivan Toney (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Leandro Trossard (Arsenal)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

Bayern Munich

Thomas Tuchel's uninspiring start hints at bigger problems in Bavaria

Dejected...Bayern players react after being knocked out of the Champions League last eight by Manchester City

Maybe too much was expected of Bayern Munich's end-of-term fireman Thomas Tuchel, who was recently parachuted in following the surprise sacking of previous incumbent Julian Nagelsmann.

Tuchel, one of the best tacticians in world football, had more than enough acumen to help mastermind a 4-2 Bundesliga victory over arch-rivals Dortmund in his first game in charge, a win that many saw as the first step in a new dawn of triumph at the Allianz Arena. So what a shock it was to see Tuchel's Bayern subsequently implode, dumped out of the German Cup at the quarter-final stage by Freiburg, then succumbing to a 4-1 aggregate defeat to Manchester City in the Champions League last eight.

In ditching Nagelsmann in favour of Tuchel, the Bayern boardroom had clearly been banking on Tuchel working a rerun of the water-to-wine rebuild he instigated on being appointed at Chelsea mid-way through the 2020-21 season, needing just four months to turn a moribund side into European champions.

Thoughts of a Champions League showdown with Manchester City also would have played a part in Bayern's decision to bring in a new coach; at Chelsea the German was widely considered to have Pep Guardiola's number, beating him three times out of five including the 2021 Champions League final.

The Bayern board, somewhat panicked by a number of sub-par displays in the Bundesliga this season, reasoned that Tuchel offered them more guarantees than Nagelsmann, better team organisation, more authority and greater big-match experience.

Not for one moment did Bayern chairman Oliver Kahn and director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic imagine that within three weeks of Tuchel's arrival, Bayern would be out of two of their three competitions. Egg on face does not begin to describe it.

For Bayern, German champions for the past ten years, Bundesliga titles are the bare minimum and now that's the only goal left for Tuchel and company this term, a goal further dented by a shock 1-1 draw with relegation-threatened Hoffenheim and a 3-1 defeat to European-chasing Mainz before the end of April.

At a club where they solely define themselves in terms of European success and take domestic gongs for granted, it will surely pain them that in each of the past two seasons they

have exited the Champions League at the quarter-final stage.

Inevitably, the heavy 3-0 defeat at the Etihad has led many in the German media to question Bayern's wisdom in opting to switch coach for the run-in. Was it worth the upheaval? Or the reported €27 million they had to pay Nagelsmann to terminate his contract? Lest we forget: he had a perfect record with Bayern in the Champions League this season, six wins out of six in the group phase and the prize scalp of Paris Saint-Germain in the last 16.

While Tuchel is an excellent coach, he is no wizard, someone who can conjure up his own reality. The weaknesses that plagued Bayern domestically under Nagelsmann did not evaporate when a new sheriff arrived in town. These past few months, the Reds have been most un-Bayern like: chronically inconsistent, prone to defensive gaffes, often failing to turn possession into chances and lacking in both a genuine centre-forward and a number six. The bottom line is that they lack quality in certain positions, particularly at the point of attack, where prolific marksman Robert Lewandowski has not been replaced.

In addition to personnel choices and tactical/technical matters, Tuchel also has dressing room problems to address. The mood music in the club is off-key at the moment, the atmosphere soured by too much grievance and too little solidarity. The Bayern camp today very much is a fragile entity. Hence the dressing room bust-up in the wake of the Manchester City defeat, Sadio Mane allegedly punching Leroy Sane and receiving a fine and suspension for his "misconduct" as the club later described it in a statement.

Away from the microphones and cameras, Tuchel will, as a matter of course, have to administer a course of home truths to his new charges. He will be only too aware that the Bayern of 2022-23 has not been as stable as in previous years, that both collectively and individually, fluctuating performance levels have become the norm rather than the exception. A perfectionist in every way, Tuchel has every chance of putting Bayern back on the straight and narrow, improving the structure of the team and its effectiveness. Such a reset, however, will take time to achieve. You can't alter a playing philosophy on the back of a few training sessions.

Some may argue that a certain amount of complacency has taken root at Bayern. Following the first-leg defeat at Manchester City, several Bayern players went down the self-delusion road, claiming that the result did not reflect the state of play on the pitch. "It's a brutal result for us," opined midfielder Joshua Kimmich after the match. "For 65, 70 minutes we were really good. We had things under control and were finding space. It was an even game." Kimmich cannot be blamed for trying to accentuate the positive. Professionals do it all the time. But by no stretch of the imagination was this a fine Bayern showing, feeble in attack and defensively a mistake waiting to happen. Without some brilliant saves by Bayern goalkeeper Yann Sommer, Manchester City might have scored six or seven. In normal circumstances a team set up by Tuchel plays with infinitely more substance and seriousness.

The events of the first leg made the outcome of the tie a foregone conclusion, and City never looked in real danger during the return leg in Munich. Tuchel's frustration was visibly exposed in the dying minutes when he was sent to the stands by the referee.

Bayern is Tuchel's dream job; he is Bavarian born and raised and always aspired to coach there one day. What a shame then that his reign has started on the wrong foot. That's the problem with working at Bayern, where winning is everything and failure is a poor man's option.

Nick Bidwell

Not for one moment did Bayern chairman Oliver Kahn and director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic imagine that within three weeks of Tuchel's arrival, Bayern would be out of two of their three competitions

Frustrated...Tuchel lost his temper in Bayern's defeat to Manchester City

Mateo Retegui

The Argentine-born striker making headlines for Italy

A goal against England on his international debut. Another goal in his second outing against Malta. Two goals in his first two international appearances in March for Italy catapulted 23-year-old Mateo Retegui into the limelight.

"We were looking for a goalscorer," said Roberto Mancini, "and we have found one." The *Azzurri* coach went even further in his praise. "He reminds me of [Gabriel] Batistuta when he first came to Italy."

Retegui may be a classic number nine like "Batigol", which is exactly the type of player that Italy have been struggling to find, yet Mancini's decision to call up the striker was a gamble and something straight out of left field.

"My dad called me after training to tell me he had important news. I never imagined it would be a call from Mancini," admitted Retegui.

He has never played in Italy. He is the first player in the *Azzurri's* history to score his first goal while not playing for a European side. The week before he found space inside the area at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona to fire past Jordan Pickford, he was lining up for Tigre against Arsenal de Sarandi in front of a crowd of fewer than 1,000 in the Argentine first division.

Born just outside Buenos Aires, Retegui has played all his football in Argentina. His claim to Italian citizenship is through his Sicilian grandfather. His father Carlos is one of Argentina's sporting heroes, having coached the Argentina national men's hockey team to Olympic gold in 2016. His sister Micaela won a silver Olympic medal in the same sport in 2020. Retegui himself started playing hockey in his teens before switching to football, and was quickly snapped up by Boca Juniors' youth academy.

Though he debuted with the *Xeneize* first team, a seven-minute cameo in 2018, Retegui was never handed the opportunity at the Bombonera and was loaned out instead. In his first spell away from Boca, at Estudiantes de La Plata, the striker managed five goals in 29 games, before notching seven goals in 61 games for Talleres de Cordoba.

Debut goal...Retegui celebrates scoring against England

In the deal for a third loan spell, this time to Tigre in 2022, Boca included 50 per cent of the player's transfer rights for an amount that placed Retegui's value at under US$5 million. It turned out to be a shrewd piece of business by Tigre. Several months later, Retegui was the top scorer in the first division with 19 goals in 40 games. Those goals were the springboard for Tigre, who had only been promoted the year before, to finish a proud seventh.

The 2023 season is still in its infancy, but Retegui is back at the top of the scoring charts, with eight goals from his first 11 games, and that sustained form was the springboard for his Italy call-up.

> "We were looking for a goalscorer, and we have found one. He reminds me of [Gabriel] Batistuta"
>
> **Italy coach Roberto Mancini**

Mancini points to the lack of Italian players in Serie A, especially in the number nine role, as the reason for calling up Retegui.

"Years ago I said only players born in Italy should play for the national team," Mancini said of the decision, "but there weren't the problems we face now and the world has changed."

Retegui, however, is only the latest in a long line of players born abroad to represent Italy. The 1934 World Cup-winning side featured the quartet of Argentines Luis Monti, Raimundo Orsi, Enrique Guaita and Attilio Demaria. Mauro Camoranesi followed in their footsteps by winning the World Cup in 2006, and Brazilian-born Jorginho was an integral part of the Euro 2020-winning team.

An Argentina call-up seemed unlikely. Ahead of Retegui stand World Cup winners Julian Alvarez and Lautaro Martinez, and coach Lionel Scaloni is now looking to the next generation of players who will make up the national team in a post-Lionel Messi era. Many of those players are in Europe. Collectively they have become known as the "*Europibes*" – Euro Kids – children who were born or grew up outside Argentina after their families emigrated, such as Manchester United's electric winger Alejandro Garnacho.

So while Argentina scouts the European game for players, Italy have gone to South America for a possible solution to their striking conundrum. "My next club will be in Europe," Retegui has said, with Internazionale reportedly keen. At 23 he is older than many Argentine players to make a move abroad, but few have a career in Europe kick-started by a call-up by Italy.

Joel Richards

Didier Digard

Nice's inexperienced temporary coach has hit the ground running

Three years younger than club captain Dante, OGC Nice interim coach Didier Digard is one of France's more unexpected managerial success stories. So minimal is Digard's experience that, until recently and in circumstances similar to Reims boss Will Still, his lack of French football's BEPF coaching diploma meant the Riviera club were fined €25,000 for every game he oversaw. However, since Digard's January arrival, Nice have progressed from cup humiliation by third-tier Le Puy and fretting over the four-team relegation zone to vibrant European hopefuls.

As a result, despite the price tag, Nice quickly extended Digard's stay to at least the end of the season, impressed by an opening run of 14 games unbeaten which produced away victories over podium-chasing Lens, Marseille and Monaco. The former Middlesbrough midfielder has amped up training intensity and provided a more positive coaching presence than relatively dogmatic former managers Lucien Favre and Patrick Vieira. A switch to a forward-thinking 4-3-3 has got the best from his star players too, most notably dynamic midfielder Khephren Thuram, who made his France debut in March.

Promoted from the youth set-up – the new coach's willingness to blood academy graduates has become a prominent feature of *Les Aiglons*' resurgence – Digard's success has been aided by a seismic shift in mood at the club, as well as sporting director Florent Ghisolfi's admission that he "won't have any particular pressure for results." An opening 6-1 thrashing of Montpellier portrayed a team set free after predecessor Favre's tenure became toxic following reported disagreements over off-season spending.

Thanks to former Cardiff City and Crystal Palace director Iain Moody's temporary role, a slew of Premier League cast-offs arrived last summer. None have adapted as hoped. Aaron Ramsey has offered minimal impact despite becoming a starter, Ross Barkley wasn't even registered for the Europa Conference League and Nicolas Pepe's form and fitness have rarely been sustained together, although former Leicester City goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel eventually settled after some early inconsistency and criticism from fans.

> Since Digard's January arrival, Nice have progressed from cup humiliation by third-tier Le Puy and fretting over the four-team relegation zone to vibrant European hopefuls

However, off-the-pitch changes since have provided a platform for Digard, Ghisolfi's October arrival in particular, the 38-year-old having helped spearhead Lens' riotous return to Ligue 1. January signings of Nigeria striker Terem Moffi from Lorient, who provided nine goals and assists combined in his first 12 games, and versatile Burundi star Youssouf Ndayishimiye from Istanbul Basaksehir show a much more considered approach. Both signings are youthful, offer considerable resale upside and immediately improved Digard's team.

Still just 36 and lacking any previous senior management experience, Digard's initial success is as impressive as it is unexpected, but his longer-term suitability remains uncertain. Despite just two defeats up to mid-April, an admittedly congested table since Digard's arrival has only seen Nice rise to seventh in that time. An impressive turnaround, certainly, but with the club aiming to challenge Paris Saint-Germain, Digard still has much to prove to Nice's INEOS owners and British billionaire Sir Jim Ratcliffe.

Despite the shrewd appointment of Ghisolfi and Digard's new-look swash-buckling team, the prospective Manchester United buyers' haphazard management of Nice should concern supporters of the Premier League giants. Favre's fractious reign was the club's second in short order after Christophe Galtier's ended in a spectacular public fallout with director Julien Fournier, while former British Olympic cycling coach, now INEOS' sporting spearhead, Dave Brailsford's summer audit proved painfully ponderous, affording Nice's rivals a big head start.

As a result, context is crucial when assessing Digard's success. At the coach's unveiling, Ghisolfi explained that "to build, you sometimes have to deconstruct," and Digard's stripped-back, low-key approach has offered much-needed stability and harmony. However, such a regression was never the plan for an ambitious project. Despite positivity over the interim coach's progress before a more permanent decision is made this summer, INEOS' patience will not last too long.

Digard has shown he's the right coach for Nice's current stage of development but now he needs to prove he's qualified to take *Les Aiglons* into the next.

Adam White

Impressive...Digard salutes the Nice fans

Spakenburg

Amateur club stun Dutch football by reaching cup semi-finals

There was so much to talk about that it's difficult to know where to start. The Dutch Cup semi-finals made more than enough headlines and most of them for the wrong reasons: the hostility between arch-rivals Feyenoord and Ajax, who met at De Kuip, culminating in Davy Klaassen being struck on the head by an object thrown from the stands, or the homophobic chants aimed at PSV's Xavi Simons. It all provoked another social discussion about how to tackle these issues in Dutch football. Again.

With so many shadows cast over the competition it would be easy to forget that there was also something to smile about. A remarkable fairy tale from an amateur club reaching the semi-finals that gave Dutch giants PSV a run for their money and almost caused the Dutch FA another problem to solve.

SV Spakenburg play in the third tier of Dutch football (known as the Jack's League, for sponsorship reasons), which is the country's highest amateur level. They are not exactly blowing the league away either, currently set for a mediocre mid-table finish. Yet that didn't prevent the club from causing one of the most extraordinary giant-killing cup campaigns in the history of Dutch football.

With only one professional player in their squad (Luuk Admiraal, a 21-year-old forward on loan from Eredivisie club Excelsior) they joined the cup competition at the second preliminary round, progressing through to the second round after relatively unremarkable victories over fellow amateur sides DOVO and TEC.

And that was when the real story began. First, they knocked out Eredivisie club Groningen with a 3-2 win in the second round, then defeated Katwijk – leaders of the Jack's League – on penalties before pulling off their biggest shock: a stunning 4-1 victory over nearby Eredivisie club Utrecht. No one was expecting it; the team from the tiny fishing village had their biggest catch yet. And it was totally deserved, outplaying the team placed 39 places above them and bringing a place in the semi-finals safely into the port.

It meant that Spakenburg had become only the third amateur team to reach the Dutch Cup semi-finals since the introduction of professional football in 1956. Even more astoundingly they weren't the first team from their village, which has a population of a little over 20,000, to do so. Back in 1975, their neighbours IJsselmeervogels also achieved the feat. At the time, it was hard to swallow for die-hard Spakenburg fans, as the village is deeply divided by the two football clubs. Their rivalry is among the fiercest in Dutch football, and has been described as the world's biggest amateur derby.

Upset...Spakenburg players celebrate with their fans after beating Utrecht 4-1

> "Not that we will win, that isn't realistic. If we do then I will stand down because after that it won't get any better"
>
> **Spakenburg coach Chris de Graaf ahead of the semi-final draw**

Now though it was Spakenburg's time in the spotlight and, with Ajax, Feyenoord and PSV the other semi-finalists, they would play the game of their lives in the last four. Coach Chris de Graaf had his eye on a trip to Rotterdam to take on the Eredivisie leaders, Feyenoord: "Playing in De Kuip [Feyenoord's stadium] would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience," he said. "Not that we will win, that isn't realistic. If we do then I will stand down because after that it won't get any better."

De Graaf eventually had to settle for a home tie with PSV and his De Kuip experience could only come from reaching the final. If they did then the Dutch FA would have had a problem. The final was pencilled in for April 30, a Sunday, which was out of the question for the amateur club: Spakenburg is in the heart of the Dutch Bible Belt and in their articles of association it is pinned that they won't play on The Lord's Day.

The conundrum was ultimately avoided, but it was close. In a packed De Westmaat, PSV struggled for most of the first half, with the home side giving as good as they got. But on the stroke of half-time Erick Gutierrez broke the deadlock, poking home from close range following a corner, and straight after the break Patrick van Aanholt doubled their lead.

Spakenburg didn't surrender. Just before the hour mark an incredible 35-yard effort by left-back Dwayne Green, who was once on the books of RKC Waalwijk, Den Bosch and Dordrecht, restored faith. And, although it wasn't enough, it made the Barbadian the first amateur player to score in a semi-final.

So De Graaf and his players, who earned their club at least €500,000, didn't make it to De Kuip. Instead they found another destination: Ibiza, where the squad will enjoy an end-of-season trip. There are worse places to relive those fairy-tale moments with a cocktail and a smile.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

Gift Orban

Nigeria's latest striking sensation

Nigeria's wealth of options in attack is well documented. As well as Victor Osimhen of Napoli, who continues to evolve into one of the world's premier strikers (more on him on page 44), they have Kelechi Iheanacho and Emmanuel Dennis playing in the Premier League, Ademola Lookman scoring goals for Atalanta, and Samuel Chukwueze lighting up the wing for Villarreal.

Now though, there is another young attacking starlet ready to join them: Gift Orban. Since joining Gent from Norwegian side Stabaek in January, the 20-year-old has been a total revelation, scoring 14 goals in his first 14 games in all competitions, particularly catching the eye in the Europa Conference League. In the last-16 win over Istanbul Basaksehir he scored four times across the two legs, including hitting the fastest hat-trick ever recorded in a UEFA club competition, netting the treble in just 205 seconds to fire Gent to their first European quarter-final in 31 years.

In little time he has already earned rave reviews, not only for his talent but for his hunger and mentality as well.

"He wants to win every training session," Torgeir Bjarmann, Stabaek's sporting director, told Belgian publication *Nieuwsblad*. "He wants to score every workout. He never relaxes."

Consider the manner in which his talent was discovered and it is easy to see why. Orban came to the attention of European scouts during a showcase scouting event organised by Nigerian agent Atta Aneke, who manages the careers of Odion Ighalo, Chidera Ejuke and Jens Petter Hauge.

These talent showcases are quite competitive, with thousands of top prospects having only a brief window of opportunity within which to demonstrate potential. However, even in that throng, Orban's talent shone through.

"He scored three goals in one of the games," Aneke said. "But it wasn't just that he scored, it was how. His confidence, the way he struck the ball; I instantly knew that this was a player that would go far."

Having come through this, as well as initial rejection at Stabaek, Orban is keen to seize every opportunity. That desire comes through in his conduct, which by all accounts is scrupulously professional, and in his style of play.

Quick-fire hat-trick ...Orban celebrates scoring against Istanbul Basaksehir

Part of his education as a striker was to not allow goalkeepers time to set, and so he "kicks from all possible angles" and does so early and often. It is a policy that has served him extremely well so far, and one that has made all of Europe sit up and take notice.

After helping Stabaek gain promotion to the Norwegian top flight with 16 goals in six months, Gent came calling. The reluctance of the Scandinavian club to sell forced the Belgians to submit a reported bid of €3.3 million, a fee that some considered excessive.

> "He has turned out to be a stroke of luck"
> **Gent coach Hein Vanhaezebrouck**

Now, that looks like an absolute bargain. Orban has hit the ground running, defying expectations. "He has turned out to be a stroke of luck," said Gent coach Hein Vanhaezebrouck. "When you see him play, it turns out that we didn't pay too much."

His combination of ability, hunger and adaptability will no doubt make Orban an attractive proposition to clubs in Europe's major leagues. In that sense, the Europa Conference League has provided him with a strong platform, and in typical fashion he has seized the opportunity with both hands, scoring five in six. The obvious question is: what could his ceiling be? "Put him tomorrow at a top French club, and he would think he should be in the team right away," Bjarmann claimed.

Orban split his childhood between Nigeria and Togo, but there is little controversy surrounding his international future. In March, he received a call-up to the Nigeria Under-23 side ahead of a 2024 Olympics qualifier; however, Gent declined, citing the fact that the notice had arrived late.

In any case, if he keeps up his form, it is only a matter of time before he makes his bow, even with Nigeria's host of options.

"The future is bright for Nigeria if we have a special player like Gift Orban to compete for a spot alongside Victor Osimhen, Terem Moffi and others," Victor Ikpeba, the 1997 African Player of the Year and former Monaco and Borussia Dortmund striker, told *World Soccer*.

"It is rare to find a two-footed player who also combines the ability to score with his head, skilful, sleek and fearless. This is a good headache for the Nigeria coach [Jose Peseiro] because it will mean strong competition in the Super Eagles team."

Competition would be stiff. However, if there is one person who has already shown he can stand out from the crowd, and who backs himself in any environment, it's Orban.

Oluwashina Okeleji

Kecskemeti

Underdog club chasing history just a few years after nearly going bust

Hungary is often the location for big Hollywood movies. *Dune, Blade Runner* and *The Martian* were all filmed in studios around the country. But at the moment, it's a football pitch in Kecskemet, a city some 50 miles south of Budapest, where a Hollywood script is being written.

Back in 2015, when the Hungarian Football Association (MLSZ) expelled Kecskemeti TE from the top flight due to financial reasons and demoted them to the third tier, few would have envisaged that just eight years later the club would be a few games away from qualifying for European football thanks to a dramatic rebirth.

In those dark times, Kecskemeti went into liquidation and essentially ceased to exist. The team's future was on a perilous precipice. A team who only four years prior lifted its first ever Hungarian Cup and had survived over 100 years of history was at threat of being wiped from existence.

Pulling out of competing in the third division due to the costs required to keep the team running, it was thanks to local businessmen that the club was revived and able to purchase a licence in Hungary's fourth tier – an essentially amateur division – to begin its metamorphosis.

Forced to compete under a new name (Kecskemeti LC) it took the club three years to gain promotion back into Hungary's third tier. But when the club finally returned, there was more cause for celebration. In the same year the club's new ownership purchased the rights to be called Kecskemeti TE again, restoring its old legacy.

Having regained its identity, the club's form ebbed and flowed in the third tier. In the end, when Kecskemeti finally earned promotion to the second tier, it was by mere proxy rather than on merit. Having finished second in the 2020-21 season, the club gained promotion when Ivansca, the league winners, decided to pull out from competing due to financial reasons.

Hollywood story ...Kecskemeti TE players embrace *kecskemetite.hu*

It was here where the club's Hollywood tale really began a rapid ascent. Kecskemeti appointed Istvan Szabo as coach who, fittingly for the club's Hollywood narrative, shares his name with one of the country's most celebrated film directors. More importantly, Szabo's arrival was a kind of homecoming: he spent his youth playing in the club's academy, worked in several coaching roles at Kecskemeti and was the assistant manager when the club lifted the Hungarian Cup in 2011.

> Kecskemeti's future was on a perilous precipice. A team who only four years prior lifted its first ever Hungarian Cup and had survived over 100 years of history was at threat of being wiped from existence

Mastermind... Kecskemeti boss Istvan Szabo

The club's hero had arrived but even the most optimistic supporters didn't expect him to be the man to guide them back to the top flight in a whirlwind of a debut season.

As late as April, the club sat in fourth spot, with a top-two finish and promotion seemingly out of reach. Second-placed Szeged and Diosgyor

in third were the clear favourites.

But then came a remarkable implosion of not just one but both of Kecskemeti's rivals. When Szeged beat Diosgyor 5-0, the latter decided to poach the former's manager, Dragan Vukmir, in a dramatic sequence of events that caused chaos at both clubs. Kecskemeti quietly took advantage, winning all of their last six games to secure promotion back to the top flight after seven years away.

Operating on a meagre budget, everyone had expected Kecskemeti to be the whipping boys of the top flight this season, especially after top scorer Daniel Lukacs opted to stay in the second tier with Diosgyor. But Szabo and his team of underdogs have confounded expectations: they have been the closest challengers to champions and leaders Ferencvaros, and are on course for an historic second-place finish – the best in the club's entire 111-year history – and a spot in Europe.

Szabo's counter-pressing football has been eye-catching and has taken everyone by surprise, including Ferencvaros, who were beaten 2-0 back in October.

Because of its small budget, even by Hungarian standards, the club has had to rely on a young team. Among the core stars are 22-year-old Gabor Szalai, who studied in the UK at Brooke House Football Academy College, Leicestershire, 21-year-old Krisztofer Horvath, on loan from Torino, and Szabo's 23-year-old son Bence Bano-Szabo, who has been pulling the strings in attack. In total, the average age of the squad is just 23.9 years old.

Eight years ago, when the club had been demoted to Hungary's amateur leagues, nobody would have even dreamt of European football. The club's historic heights seemed behind them. Even two years ago, when the club finished second in Hungary's third tier, this new chapter seemed like a fanciful wish, but now it's real.

At this rate Kecskemeti's story might just make it on the big screens as well – not in Hollywood, but in the Europa Conference League on Thursday nights.

Ben Bocsak

Rasmus Hojlund

The great new hope of Danish football

Scoring five goals in your first two starts as an international striker is guaranteed to win you instant attention – anywhere, anytime. When your country ignored you for the World Cup a few months earlier and then flopped badly in the tournament, and when you are a Scandinavian who resembles nobody so much as the new superstar of football Erling Haaland, the spotlight will be intense.

Rasmus Hojlund had only just turned 20 years old when he hit a hat-trick for Denmark in their opening Euro 2024 qualifier in March and then two more in the next match. So, where did he come from?

The proper answer to that question indicates why comparisons with Haaland, and any temptation to crown the young Dane as a new prince of strikers, should be resisted – at least for now. Hojlund's scoring record at club level is moderate, and the sudden excitement surrounding him is all about potential rather than any serious achievement.

Hojlund knows it only too well himself, saying: "I would not like to compare myself to him [Haaland]. Yes, I can see the similarities. He's fast and I'm also fast. He's left-footed and I'm left-footed. He's strong and I'm strong too. I hope I can reach his level."

They were wise words, because the differences between the pair are pronounced. Both have played in Austria – Hojlund for Sturm Graz and Haaland for Red Bull Salzburg – yet while the Dane returned a solid 12 goals in 21 appearances, Erling walked all over the league, netting 29 goals in 27 matches. There are differences in style too: despite standing over 6ft, Hojlund is relatively weak in the air and prefers to drop deep and get involved in the development of attacks rather than lead the line.

Last August, just eight months after arriving in Austria, Hojlund joined Italian outfit Atalanta for a modest £15 million transfer fee. Before the World Cup, his tally stood at one goal from 12 Serie A matches, so it was hardly surprising that Denmark declined to take a gamble on a 19-year-old with no particular form, even given their paucity of top-class strikers over the past decade.

Three goals in the first three games of 2023 for Atalanta began to change the picture. If Hojlund could score consistently, he would be worth looking at given his blistering pace, technical ability, relentless energy and enthusiasm. Denmark head coach Kasper Hjulmand selected the striker, with headline-grabbing impact. And yet, let's be clear, these goals were against Finland and Kazakhstan, not major opponents.

Time will tell as to whether he can be as formidable against better teams and more accomplished defences. A clear and present danger for Hojlund is the burden of too much expectation, with transfer speculation already linking him with Real Madrid, Juventus and his favourite boyhood club Manchester United. It might be better to resist the lure, and let another season at Atalanta reveal the potential and the reality of Denmark's big new hope.

Hjulmand summed it up nicely, saying: "It was wonderful to see his goals for us. But it's important he keeps the perfect balance between the courage and self-belief of youth and the extreme humility and hard work required to perform in top-level football."

Jim Holden

Explosive start... Hojlund celebrates after scoring twice against Kazakhstan

eyewitness

Lukas Vrablik reports

SWITZERLAND

Operation Rebuild

A former Basel player is attempting to restore the club to the top of Swiss football

For many years, FC Basel dominated Swiss football, looking down on their rivals from the top of the mountainous country's summit. Since 2003, they have won the Swiss Super League 11 times, including eight in a row between 2010 and 2017. With more wins came more prize money, particularly from competing in the Champions League, and as their finances grew ever greater so did their dominance.

Between 2009 and 2018, Basel made it into the group stage of the Champions League seven times, advancing to the last 16 on three occasions, alongside a run to the Europa League semi-finals in 2013 and the quarter-finals in 2014 and 2020. Regular European football – and facing the continent's biggest teams – brought more money, more attention and made the club attractive to its transfer targets. In Switzerland, nobody could stand up to Basel for quite some time.

Yet the powerhouse club has come to a crossroads. The dominance is over, and attempts to replicate the success of the golden era using the same methods have, so far, been unsuccessful.

The changing of the guard came in 2017-18, when Young Boys won the first of four consecutive titles. Last season it was FC Zurich's turn, but Basel remained competitive, finishing second in four of the last five seasons. But this season the wheels have fallen off domestically at a club that is used to winning, exacerbated somewhat by their stunning run to the Europa Conference League semi-finals.

David Degen has seen a lot of success in his career. The former right-winger was part of Basel's youth academy and won the league five times with the club. He won 17 caps for Switzerland and played alongside his twin brother Philipp, a right-back who went on to play for Borussia Dortmund and Liverpool. Now David is back at his old club as president, building Basel's strategy and philosophy. ▸

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St. Jakob-Park... Basel's home since 2001

"For me, Basel was always special because I grew up in the region," he says. "My best memory as a player was that I was lucky to be able to play with my brother at this beautiful club.

"Basel calls itself the capital of football in Switzerland and I think there is some truth in it. Basel always had a huge fanbase and up to 50,000 spectators in the old stadium [Basel moved to the 38,521-seater St. Jakob-Park in 2001]. Of course, the popularity grew in the last 15 years when the club won eight titles in a row and was able to perform some exploits at international level."

Throughout its success, Basel was a hotbed for some of Europe's biggest talents. As well as producing Swiss internationals of the past such as the Degen brothers, Marco Streller and Switzerland's record scorer Alexander Frei, they also produced the backbone of the current side in Granit Xhaka, Xherdan Shaqiri and Yann Sommer, while Serbia's Zdravko Kuzmanovic and Croatia's Ivan Rakitic also started life at Basel. Over the years, the model expanded to take in players from further afield that could be developed and sold for profit, as with Felipe Caicedo, Mohamed Salah and Mohamed Elneny. Indeed, their successful combination of youth development and transfer strategy has arguably provided the blueprint for many teams outside Europe's top five leagues.

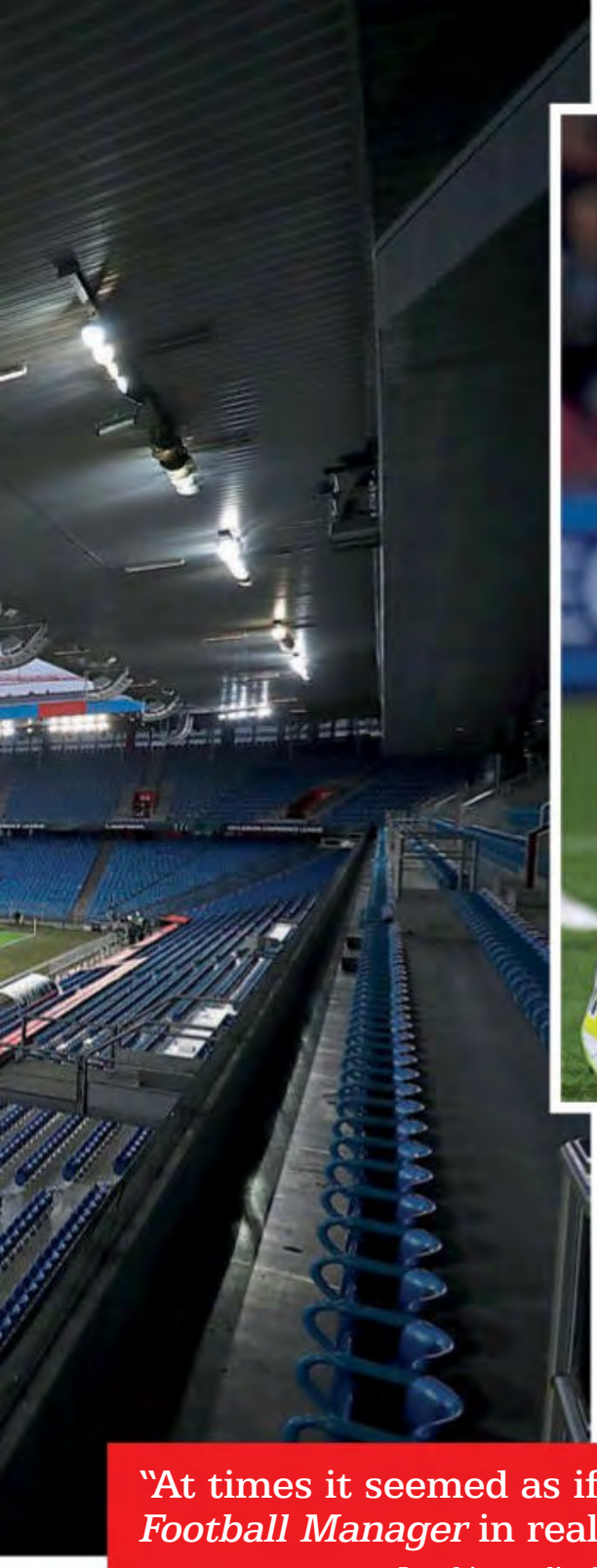
Throughout their era of dominance, the dressing room was full of leaders and had a clear winning mentality, which in turn made Basel's biggest stars mentally strong and ready for the highest level – and therefore an attractive club to recruit from for Europe's biggest clubs.

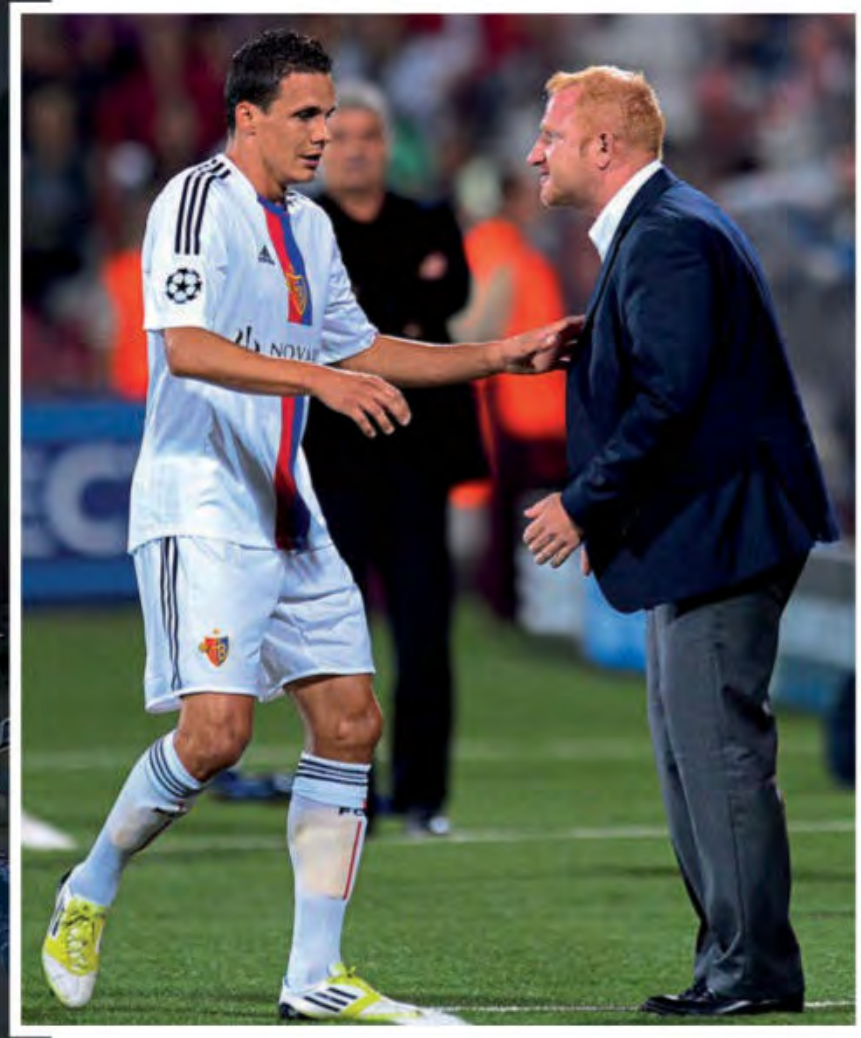
"There is a saying that wearing the FCB badge on your chest is heavy, and I think that's correct," Degen explains. "I think it's heavier than in other clubs in Switzerland because we have the most attention; not only of the city and its fans, but also from the media. And with a lot of attention comes more pressure. Even abroad a lot of people know Basel from playing in Europe nearly every year. So, when a player comes to Basel or leaves Basel for another club, people recognise that."

The decline began with a change in the club structure. In 2017 Bernhard Heusler, the club president that oversaw Basel's long run of league success, stepped down. His replacement, local entrepreneur Bernhard Burgener, was hugely unpopular. After a long dispute, a group of investors led by Degen purchased a majority stake in 2021 and have led the club ever since.

The idea is to replicate Basel's success in the transfer market from previous years, getting good players with potential and selling them on to richer leagues for significant profit. It's hard to find the balance, though; a lack of domestic success has led to fewer appearances in the Champions League and, therefore, less money.

Degen brought in a "new era", says local journalist Lucas Werder from *20 Minuten*. "The club now relies more on young, talented players from abroad. Some of them are Swiss, who had perhaps moved abroad too early," he explains. "On deadline day in 2021, five players were signed in just one day. I don't remember anything like that in Switzerland; at times





Management duo... David Degen (L) and Heiko Vogel (R)

> "At times it seemed as if they were playing *Football Manager* in real life"
>
> **Local journalist Lucas Werder on Basel's transfer policy**

it seemed as if they were playing *Football Manager* in real life.

"David Degen justified the strategy by saying there were currently no young players of sufficient quality in Switzerland. However, one has to give Degen credit for the fact that the club managements before him had signed lucrative and long contracts with players that the club could no longer afford. That's another reason why they had to go other, cheaper ways."

It is an approach that is still waiting to yield results, and Basel have hit plenty of bumps as they try to find their way. In the summer of 2022, former striker Frei returned to the club as head coach having taken FC Winterthur from the second tier to the top flight. It was his second spell in charge of Basel, having served as interim boss in 2018 while working in the academy.

Yet taking the gig full-time proved disastrous. In February, Frei departed after winning just 14 of his 34 matches in charge, with the club lying seventh in the league. Heiko Vogel, Basel's sporting director, stepped in as interim. Like Frei, it was also his second spell in charge, having previously coached Basel in 2011-12 when, incidentally, Degen was among the playing staff. While Vogel's more direct and counter-attacking style brought Europa Conference League victories over Trabzonspor, Slovan Bratislava and Nice, the league position has seen little improvement.

Yet reviving the team's short-term fortune is only half the battle. The responsibility for long-term improvement lies largely with Degen.

"Football is my passion and it's where my strength is," he says. "In addition, I was always very interested in business in general and I love challenges. Now I can combine my passion for the business world with my passion for football. That's perfect and I enjoy working for this amazing club every day."

Asked where he sees Basel in five years, he says: "It's no secret that we want to bring Basel back to the top of Switzerland and at some point back to the Champions League. We're building the structures to achieve our goals and I'm certain that we'll be able to do this."

The blueprint isn't hard to find; it is essentially the same as the "golden era" of Basel, although the current distribution of power and resources in European football has shifted since then.

"This is the situation we are in. Switzerland is an education league and Basel is a club that does not have unlimited financial resources. This means that we have to get the most out of our scouting and work with our youth department for our own next generation. We want the best domestic players, supplemented with foreign talents. We are also undergoing a transformation in our youth department to make the structures even better so that we can once again become a leading training centre in Europe," says Degen.

Fans remain doubtful, especially with Young Boys and the Swiss title well out of reach for this season, but a top-two finish is still on the table. But Werder believes that a renewed focus on youth will grant Degen and Vogel more patience from the stands.

"The club's own young players have hardly played a role in recent months. Many of them have moved to other Swiss clubs because they hope to have a better chance of playing time there," he points out. "Many fans would like to watch local players who identify more with the club." Taulant Xhaka, the long-serving vice-captain, recently penned a new deal – albeit after lengthy negotiations.

For Degen to achieve his aim of returning Basel to the top of Swiss football, there is plenty more to do.

Long-serving midfielder...Taulant Xhaka in action in this season's Europa Conference League

eyewitness

James Nalton reports

UNITED STATES

The CSL and New York's thriving soccer scene

New York is a city where sport never sleeps. Awaiting the hockey or basketball results from a late night in Madison Square Garden in the heart of Manhattan or Barclays Centre in Brooklyn, local papers prepare the next day's first editions' back pages. These are read bleary-eyed before a baseball matinee at Yankee Stadium (NY Yankees) in the Bronx or Citi Field (NY Mets) in Queens begins the process again.

The clamour for sporting narrative only increases during the NFL season as the Jets and Giants take to the field across the Hudson River in New Jersey.

It's a sporting melting pot of a city where success is demanded but in recent years rarely achieved. It's a city that boasts two teams in each of the four major American leagues – basketball, ice hockey, American football and baseball. But what about soccer?

On the face of it, soccer in the United States is relatively young. The 1994 World Cup led to the birth of a new professional league – Major League Soccer (MLS) – in 1996, which was the most recognisable top division in the country since the North American Soccer League (NASL).

Below the surface, though, the US has as long a history of soccer as anywhere, a history in which cities on either side of the Hudson have played a big part. Its national cup competition, the US Open Cup, has been running since 1913 and there are century-old regional leagues on each side of the country.

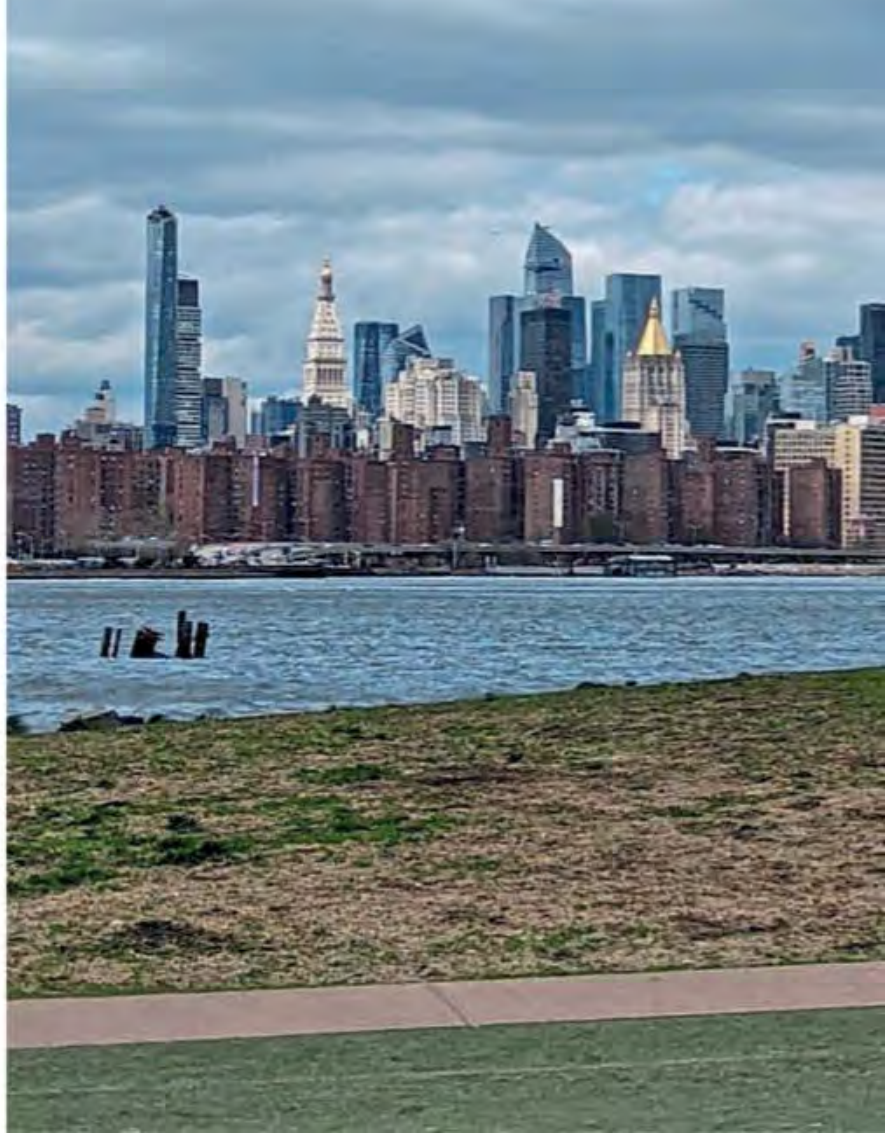
One of those is New York's Cosmopolitan Soccer League (CSL). Formed back in 1923 as the German American Soccer League, it celebrates its 100-year anniversary in May. The league contains a diverse patchwork of teams, many of which have outlived numerous professional clubs in the area, and indeed throughout the country.

In many ways, New York *is* a city of soccer and has been for well over a century, even if this has not always been recognised alongside other major league professional sports. The local MLS teams are relatively new and have their own dedicated fanbases, while in the women's game the recently rebranded NWSL side, NJ/NY Gotham FC, could become one of the most likeable teams in the area. But soccer can struggle in terms of its profile alongside those other sports.

The New York Red Bulls have a following built from their time as the MetroStars, one of the original MLS teams in 1996, while the newer New York City FC, which began play in 2015 as an extension of the City Football Group, won the city's first MLS Cup in 2021. So despite the title drought in other sports, soccer has actually been able to deliver a championship to New York. Add the 25 US Open Cups won by teams from the city, the Red Bulls' three Supporters' Shields, NJ/NY Gotham's 2009 championship (when they were known as Sky Blue FC), plus the five NASL championships won by the New York Cosmos, and soccer is historically New York's second-most successful sport behind baseball.

Digging down below the major leagues to soccer's roots in the city reveals the Cosmopolitan Soccer

Hoboken in 1937...the club claims to be America's longest continuously running soccer team



MLS champions...New York City FC in 2021

League. It is one of the longest-running leagues in the city in any sport and boasts some of the oldest sports teams in the entire country.

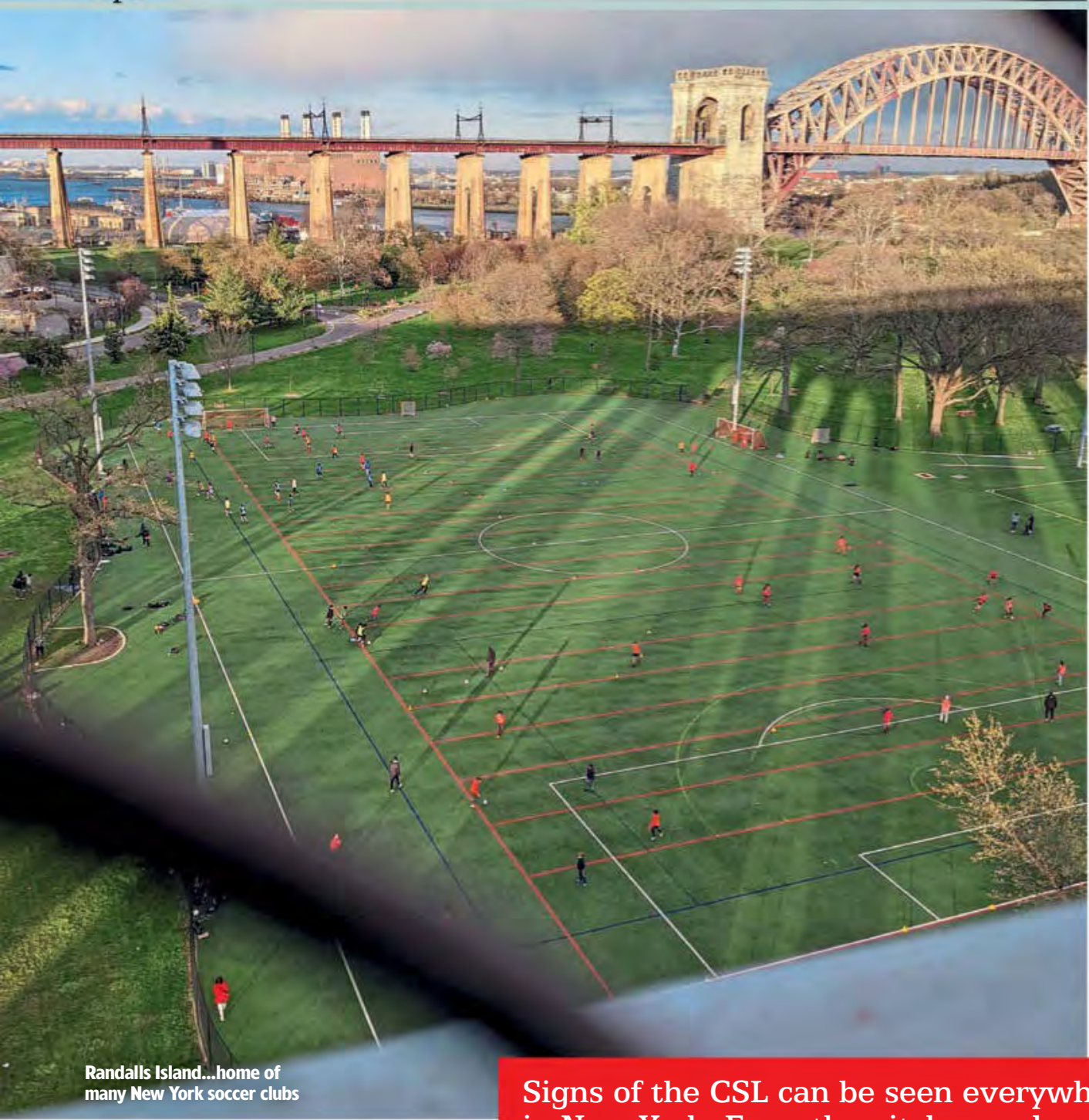
A team from the New Jersey city of Hoboken claims to be the longest continuously running team in American soccer and plays its football in the Eastern Premier Soccer League (EPSL). The EPSL could be considered to the CSL what the English Premier League is to the Football League, but in the context of American soccer, there is much more to it.

The EPSL is at the top of a regional football pyramid on the country's east coast. Although there is no official fourth tier in American soccer, the EPSL might be considered among several regional leagues around that level. The status of its teams, ranging from amateur to semi-pro, would place it similar to non-league level in England. The EPSL is also affiliated with the third-tier National Independent Soccer Association, and teams can earn places in the annual NISA Independent Cup.

The EPSL itself incorporates the Maryland Major Soccer League and the Long Island Soccer Football League among others including the CSL. This is significant because the structure of American soccer doesn't usually incorporate promotion and relegation, but teams in these local east coast leagues have the chance to be promoted to the EPSL (and their reserve teams can still play in the CSL).

"The EPSL fully supports promotion and relegation," reads a league statement. "It puts this into practice with the first ever interleague promotion/relegation in the United States by partnering with two historic elite local soccer leagues that have produced

Bushwick Inlet Park...Williamsburg International's pitch overlooks the Manhattan skyline



Randalls Island...home of many New York soccer clubs

numerous USASA National Champions, US Open Cups, and dramatic US Open Cup runs.

"All clubs should have an opportunity to advance and play at the highest level based on sporting merit."

All of this is possible due to the longevity and organisation of leagues like the CSL and clubs like Hoboken. Founded in 1912, the Hoboken team pre-dates the league itself. Given its origins as a team formed by German immigrants, it was ideally placed to be a founding member of the German American Soccer League in 1923.

"Hoboken is directly across from New York City, on the Hudson River, and the shipping lines that used to go into New York were docked in Hoboken," explains Hoboken and CSL secretary Bill Marth. "It was a big port city and there were a lot of German lines, especially from northern Germany like Bremen and Hamburg.

"Germans who worked for these shipping lines were stationed in Hoboken, unloading baggage, assisting people and carrying out repairs on the ships. So they lived in Hoboken, working for the shipping lines. Because they were from Germany and had played soccer in Germany, that's how they formed a soccer club."

Signs of the CSL can be seen everywhere in New York. From the pitches and goalposts dotted around the city, which often serve as home grounds for these teams, to the regular local pickup games

As the German American Soccer League grew it began to welcome teams elsewhere in the region, and these would often have their own European roots. Former champions include names such as German-Hungarian SC, NY Greek American, NY Pancyprian-Freedoms, Brooklyn Italians, Lansdowne Yonkers, SC Eintracht and NY Ukrainians.

Another team, New York Hungaria, were the most successful CSL team in the 1950s and early '60s, and their US Open Cup win in 1962 saw them become the first American team to qualify for the CONCACAF Champions Cup, today known as the CONCACAF Champions League. They did more than make up the numbers, too, defeating Mexican side Club Deportivo Oro 3-2 in Guadalajara and holding them to a 2-2 draw in the return leg at the Eintracht Oval in Queens. They eventually exited the competition in the second round following a 2-0 aggregate defeat to reigning champions Chivas, but held the Mexican giants to a 0-0 draw at home. It wasn't until FC Dallas defeated Pumas UNAM in 2011, 48 years later, that an American team would win in Mexico again.

Hungarian-born Andy Mate, who scored a hat-trick in that first game against CD Oro and a brace in the home leg, would later go on to represent the New York Cosmos.

The Cosmos remain New York's – arguably America's – most famous team, and were influential in the German American Soccer League being renamed as the Cosmopolitan Soccer League in 1977.

The Cosmos – the name shortened from Cosmopolitans – were formed in 1970 and played their first NASL season in 1971. During those early years, many of their players were signed from the German American Soccer League to the point they could almost be considered a GASL all-star team. One of the main reasons the Cosmos didn't appear in the US Open Cup during this period was that most of their players still played for their original GASL/CSL side in that competition.

The tradition of immigrant communities forming teams has continued, including newer German teams harking back to the days of the league's formation. One of them, Zum Schneider FC, was founded in 2003 and plays its home matches on Roosevelt Island. The team takes its name from a Bavarian beer hall located in East Village, Manhattan. Though the beer hall closed down, the team continues to play with its name having recently joined the CSL.

One of the most prominent teams in recent decades has been FC Japan, formed in the 1990s when two clubs merged, resulting in a relatively large supporter base for this level of football.

"They are very big in the Japanese community," says Marth. "They can get more spectators, maybe as many as 1,500, because the whole community comes out to watch them."

"I remember playing away matches against FC Japan," adds Hoboken FC president Nate Peabody. "They show up with their families. Everybody comes."

One of the newer teams, New York International FC, embraces New York's diversity within one club, as their name suggests. Through their community

McCarren Park...a multi-use sports pitch in New York

work, they have attracted a number of Cosmos supporters, giving them a team and a movement to get behind while the most recent version of the Cosmos are currently on an uncertain hiatus.

The community element of these clubs is part of the reason for their longevity when compared to other top-level, fully-professional American soccer teams whose franchise nature means they can be less resilient in the face of change.

"Hoboken has certainly had up and down eras, some decades where we've existed purely as a pub team, and others where we competed at a higher level," adds Peabody. "So that kind of flexibility, the ability to relegate down, if you will, and still survive just off of guys in the community who want to play, is probably a factor in this longevity."

It seems a world away from MLS, but the CSL and other long-standing American leagues such as the San Francisco Soccer Football League and the Chicago National Soccer League play an important part in upholding the sport, and interest and participation in it, in the United States.

With sharp soccer senses activated, signs of the CSL can be seen everywhere in New York. From the pitches and goalposts dotted around the city, which often serve as home grounds for these teams, to the regular local pickup games. One of those matches might even happen to be a game in the CSL over-40s league.

These leagues, teams, their players and the people – often volunteers – who run them are the backbone of American soccer and have provided some permanence in one of the country's more volatile and unstable sports. The CSL has helped keep soccer on the sporting map of New York.

NEW YORK SOCCER CLUBS

HOBOKEN
Founded: 1912
2022-23: EPSL

SC EINTRACHT
Founded: 1933
2022-23: Division 2 East

NY GREEK AMERICAN
Founded: 1946
2022-23: EPSL

NY UKRAINIANS
Founded: 1947
2022-23: Division 2 East

NY SHAMROCK SC
Founded: 1960
2022-23: Division 1

NY PANCYPRIAN-FREEDOMS
Founded: 1975
2022-23: EPSL

FC JAPAN
Founded: 1992
2022-23: Division 2 West

LANSDOWNE YONKERS
Founded: 1997
2022-23: EPSL

ZUM SCHNEIDER FC
Founded: 2003
2022-23: EPSL

WILLIAMSBURG INTERNATIONAL
Founded: 2011
2022-23: Division 2 East

RICHMOND COUNTY
Founded: 2016
2022-23: Division 1

NY INTERNATIONAL
Founded: 2019
2022-23: Division 2 East

Cosmopolitan League... players of NY Ukrainians and FC Japan after meeting last year

UEFA

GOODBYE UEFA?

Russian football could be ready to embark on a new era in Asia after flirting with this summer's CAFA Championship

Words: John Duerden

The last time Russia played a team from their own UEFA confederation was back in November 2021. It seems like a long time ago now. Following the invasion of Ukraine in February last year – and subsequent UEFA and FIFA bans – they received the cold shoulder from Europe and were kicked out of qualification for the 2022 World Cup and the 2024 European Championship. As things stand, the road to North America in 2026 also seems blocked, through the west at least, as most European teams don't want to be on the same pitch. But that does not mean there is no football to be played at all.

There are takers in Asia where Russia has old friends and is finding new ones too. Last year, there were friendlies against Asian Football Confederation (AFC) members Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, all former Soviet Union republics. In March this year, there was a trip to Tehran and a home tie with Iraq.

On March 29, Russian sports minister Oleg Matytsin talked of possible home and away friendlies with China, the country's most important political ally: "Given the fact that we have already organised friendly matches with teams from Iran and Iraq, as well as Uzbekistan and our other partner countries, the level of cooperation that China and Russia currently enjoy gives us grounds to hope that such a match may become a reality in the nearest future."

The country was set to compete in the Central Asian Football Association (CAFA) Championship in June, a new eight-nation tournament, though it seems that the the invitation will be declined due to scheduling issues.

It is not a surprise then that reports and rumours of Russia officially leaving UEFA on a permanent and official basis to join Asia, the continent that contains around three quarters of the country's landmass, continue to be read and heard. There are precedents: Kazakhstan and Israel left Asia for Europe, and Australia joined the AFC from Oceania in 2006. But no country has ever left UEFA.

In December, it seemed as if the Russia Football Union (RFU) was getting ready to do so, giving itself an end of year ultimatum in order to meet the deadline for the start of qualification

Making friends...fans watch Russia v Iraq

for the 2026 World Cup. "Delaying the decision by a few days means that the national teams could lose four years," RFU chief Alexander Dyukov was quoted as saying at the time. "We don't see the light at the end of the tunnel. Also, it must be said, unfortunately we are also growing apart from Europe ideologically."

PROMISED LAND?

That does not mean that Russia sees Asia as the land of milk and honey. In March's 1-1 draw in Iran, striker Nikolay Komlichenko was not impressed: "From the point of everyday life, I really did not like my time in Iran," he was quoted as saying in the Russian media. "Everything was at a low level. The Internet was at the same level that Russia was ten years ago. We saw a much higher standard of living in Uzbekistan."

Russian journalists were also less than complimentary about the state of the iconic Azadi Stadium. There were mutterings from former coaches that Russia should not be playing the likes of Iraq. All of this was well reported in Iran and did not go down well. It's always difficult to know for sure but a common online reaction gave the impression that most Iranian fans would have preferred a game against Ukraine.

Yet qualifying for the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico would undoubtedly be far easier through Asia, especially as the continent will have eight automatic spots at the 2026 tournament compared to just four last time around.

Geographically, around three quarters of Russia may be in Asia but most of the clubs are on the western side of the Ural Mountains. Playing in the AFC Champions League is not that attractive when you have been used to the prestige, standards and riches of the European version. "We need to take into account the enormous difference in the financial component," said the CSKA Moscow president, Yevgeny Giner. "We will have to start from zero. Therefore, perhaps we should wait for a return to big European football." The financial reward for winning a single game in the UEFA tournament, €2.8 million, brings almost as much as winning the whole thing in Asia.

Perhaps that helps to explain why,

...Ramin Rezaeian and Anton Miranchuk compete for the ball during Iran v Russia

despite the talk late last year of leaving, as 2023 dawned, the rhetoric has been dampened. There have been attempts to build bridges and the RFU held talks with UEFA in January. "We have established a Work Group that is engaged in the negotiating process with UEFA and FIFA on Russia's step-by-step return," RFU deputy secretary general Denis Rogachev said in parliament in March. "The process of reinstating our rights to remain part of European football is a priority, but all scenarios are currently on the table."

Yet the longer it goes on, the more attractive Asia is going to look, especially as talks with UEFA didn't really go anywhere. In February, Dyukov led a delegation to the AFC Congress that was held in Manama, Bahrain, and had meetings with AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa and other prominent figures.

> There are precedents: Kazakhstan and Israel left Asia for Europe, and Australia joined the AFC from Oceania in 2006. But no country has ever left UEFA

ASIAN ATTITUDES

If the current situation continues in Europe, much will depend on how wide open the door into Asia is. While there are friends in Central Asia, the continent is a big place. Fortunately for Russia, Sheikh Salman – already in power for a decade and granted a third term as AFC president in February – is, at least, open to the idea: "We have a good relationship with the Russian federation and with the rest of the European federations and we are always in contact with the federations on all occasions."

Given the president's influence and control it means that the AFC itself is going to seriously consider Russia. While there would be some opposition from South Korea, Japan and Australia, their influence at the AFC is not what it was and there is more power in the west these days. The Saudi Arabian football federation has already indicated that they have no problem with the addition of Russia. Riyadh's neighbours in the region would likely have few issues. Iran and Russia have grown very close off the pitch with Moscow by far Tehran's biggest investor.

In charge...Russia coach Valery Karpin (L) and RFU president Alexander Dyukov (R)

Star player...Uzbekistan's all-time record goalscorer Eldor Shomurodov

And then there is Central Asia, which has already provided three friendly opponents for Russia in 2022. CAFA, based in Tajikistan, was set up in 2014 and is one of five sub-confederations in the AFC, along with West, South, East and Southeast. All of these have their various championships which range from the low key – Japan and South Korea usually have bigger games on their mind in the East – to the big deals like the Southeast, where regional rivalries and a lack of wider success give rise to big crowds and plenty of passion.

As this is scheduled to be the first championship to be held in Central Asia, it remains to be seen where it fits on that scale and the addition of Russia may have helped in that regard. Originally, there was to be eight teams: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Russia, plus one more team invited from elsewhere in Asia. The first choice, Thailand, turned down the offer, with China possibly ready to step in. There will be two groups of four, with the winners of each advancing to the final, and the group runners-up meeting in a third-place play-off. How Russia's withdrawal affects those plans remains to be seen.

> "We have a good relationship with the Russian federation and with the rest of the European federations and we are always in contact with the federations on all occasions"
>
> **AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa**

The region has sorely underachieved since the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early '90s. Uzbekistan won the Asian Games in 1994 to suggest that they would be a force to be reckoned with but, after coming close to World Cup qualification, the White Wolves have gained a reputation for choking when the pressure is on and the prize in sight. Growing success at youth level – such as winning Asia's Under-20 Championship earlier this year and reaching the final of the Under-23 tournament last year (though both came on home soil) – suggests that the country could really welcome more competition in its own backyard. More than the others, Uzbekistan has a number of players who belong to Russian clubs, so the national team

Captain...Afghanistan star Farshad Noor (L) in action during 2022 World Cup qualifying

Bright future... Uzbekistan won the U20 Asian Cup in March

could benefit from closer ties with Moscow. At the very least, Uzbekistan will have ambitions of being one of the eight from Asia to get to the World Cup.

The likes of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have made big strides in recent years too and both have qualified for the 2023 Asian Cup. Turkmenistan and Afghanistan would not see themselves as potential winners but would welcome more competitive games. In Russia's absence, Iran and Uzbekistan will be the favourites for the first CAFA Championship but there is sure to be plenty of interest in Moscow as to how it all goes.

Open to ideas...AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

CAFA CHAMPIONSHIP ONES TO WATCH

IRAN

Mehdi Taremi

If Asia's top striker participates in the tournament, it will instantly give the competition credibility.

TURKMENISTAN

Arslanmyrat Amanow

The winger has experience in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and scores and creates most of Turkmenistan's goals.

TAJIKISTAN

Manuchekhr Dzhalilov

Striker who has also played in Russia and Indonesia.

AFGHANISTAN

Ovays Azizi

The keeper has played most of his career in Scandinavia and has been a consistent presence for his country.

KYRGYZSTAN

Tamirlan Kozubayev

The cultured and much-travelled centre-back plays his club football in Hong Kong for top-tier outfit Eastern.

UZBEKISTAN

Eldor Shomurodov

The big forward left Italian side Genoa for Roma in 2021 and is still in Serie A on loan at struggling Spezia.

THE MASKED ASSASSIN

Napoli's march to the *Scudetto* has been led by their unstoppable masked centre-forward

Words: Nick Bidwell

Is it any wonder that Napoli fans have a daily ritual of swarming around the car of striker Victor Osimhen at the entrance to the club's training ground, imploring the Nigerian for a photo or an autograph?

Devoted followers of Napoli, arguably the most ebullient and passionate fanbase in Europe, know a good thing when they see it. This season – an all-conquering edition which, by the time you're reading this, is likely to have seen *Gli Azzurri* clinch their first Serie A title in 33 years – the soundtrack of success has owed much to the 24-year-old Osimhen's sense of rhythm, the back-beat provided by the rat-a-tat-tat of his explosive finishing, an almost weekly tour de force.

Whether straightforward opportunistic finishes with either foot, lashing the ball home from all angles – even when wide out and apparently not a threat – or leaping high to power in a header, Osimhen has defied the sports convention that you only intermittently inhabit the "zone", that state of peak performance where an athlete can do no wrong. Prior to damaging an abductor muscle in March, Victor had been sensational without a pause.

Inevitably, Osimhen is one of the hottest properties in world football at the moment. Bayern Munich and Paris Saint-Germain would love to have him at the point of their attack. However the Premier League is a much more likely destination, with Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea all linked with a big summer move.

As he never tires of repeating, the Premier League has a special place in his heart and he grew up idolising Chelsea and Ivory Coast striker Didier ▶

Cete
MSC
amaze

Drogba. "Many people consider the Premier League to be the best league, the most competitive championship," said Osimhen recently after the Italian Overseas Press Association voted him the best Foreign Athlete of the Year. "I'm in a process. Today I play in Serie A, one of the best leagues. Obviously I'm working hard to fulfil my dream of playing in the Premier League one day."

The all-important question is whether Napoli owner Aurelio De Laurentiis will play ball. He has insisted on many occasions that the Nigerian ace is not for sale. But did hint a couple of months ago that a huge offer (one in the region of £150 million) may be an ice-breaker. "You can never say never," De Laurentiis told *TNT Sports Mexico*. "There are offers which really are so enormous that you can't refuse."

Throughout the current campaign, there has been an air of invincibility to Osimhen. Italian defenders, usually so adept at finding a way to disconcert a striker, have discovered to their cost that he is immune to the dark arts. Any attempt to hold, bump or intimidate him simply do not work. He just swats them aside and carries on making tracks for goal.

This extreme physicality equally takes the form of his strength in the air. Ask anyone connected with Eintracht Frankfurt, who in a Champions League round of 16 defeat to Napoli could only look on in awe as the unmarked Osimhen not only executed a prodigious leap of 2 metres 40 to reach Matteo Politano's cross, but then hung in the air to head home, generating immense power with his neck muscles. Like all the best NBA stars, Victor can "jump out of the gym". Against Spezia in

Prodigious leap ...Osimhen jumps above the Eintracht Frankfurt defence

Fans' favourite... Osimhen salutes the Napoli supporters

February, he headed home from an incredible height of 2 metres 58.

Osimhen, who has amassed over 50 goals for Napoli in all competitions since arriving from Lille in the summer of 2020, does not merely trade in firepower. Over the course of this season, he has developed into a true leader on and off the pitch, serving as the industrious example to follow, constantly cajoling and encouraging his team-mates and always ready to intervene when he senses complacency or back-sliding. Giovanni Di Lorenzo is the official Napoli skipper yet, more often than not, it is the Nigerian who takes on the role of dressing room guiding light. A case in point? The rousing, upbeat speech he made in the wake of a dispiriting home defeat to Lazio in March.

Mentally, the Nigerian has improved no end in recent times. In his two previous seasons with Napoli, he wasted far too much time on distractions, needlessly arguing with referees, playing the diva with team-mates and easily baited by opponents. Nowadays, a totally different Osimhen is on display, one who channels all his energies into the good of the collective. Much of this maturity stems from the birth last year of his first child.

What shines through is how genuinely likeable he is, how he naturally relates to the public. Following a home victory against Cremonese in February, spotting a fan with his portrait on a banner, he managed to obtain the supporter's telephone number so they could later have a chat, and at Spezia he leapt into the crowd to apologise after his wayward shot in the warm-up struck a female fan of the host side.

Osimhen was not always the immensely popular figure he is today in Naples. When he signed for *Gli Azzurri* three years ago, acquired for €75m excluding bonuses, there was a great deal of scepticism about him in the Campania city. Many were of the opinion that he was overpriced, while another group of detractors were quick to point out that he was not sufficiently box office, arguing that he could not be mentioned in the same breath as the best Napoli strikers of the last decade, notably Edinson Cavani and Gonzalo Higuain.

> "I'm working hard to fulfil my dream of playing in the Premier League one day"
>
> **Osimhen discusses his future**

Despite scoring a more than creditable 28 goals in his first two seasons at Napoli, the negative headlines still piled up. A string of injuries led to condescending injury-prone jibes, and he twice had to endure COVID lay-offs.

Just to make matters worse, in November 2021, he had to undergo facial reconstruction surgery after colliding with Internazionale stopper Milan Skriniar. Left with a broken cheekbone and eye socket, Osimhen had to have six metal plates and 18 screws inserted and was sidelined for the best part of two months. He returned to the fray early in 2022, wearing a special protective facemask and though the injuries have since healed, he continues to sport the carbon fibre guard. Psychologically, he feels much more secure with the mask and, what's more, it's proved a lucky charm.

Osimhen also had to swim against the tide in his first stint in Europe with Bundesliga outfit Wolfsburg, whom he joined in a €3.5m deal from Lagos-based side Ultimate Strikers Academy in January 2017. His reputation enhanced by a ten-goal blitz at the 2015 Under-17 World Cup and the Golden Boot he secured at that tournament, the young Osimhen had the likes of Fiorentina, Internazionale and Arsenal beating a path to his door. But he eventually committed to a pre-contract agreement with Wolfsburg, basing his decision on the conviction that he would have a better grounding and more first-team

Unstoppable...Diego Godin attempts to slow down Osimhen

opportunities at the Lower Saxon club.

What followed, though, was a fruitless 18-month spell in which he only made three starts and failed to register a single goal or assist. A scene from Wolfsburg's 2-1 loss at Hamburg on the final day of the 2016-17 season, a winner-takes-all relegation clash, perfectly encapsulated the plight of a young man lost and confused. Either naive or lazy, Osimhen only made a token gesture of resistance when allowing Hamburg winger Filip Kostic to cross unhindered for Luca Waldschmidt to head the winner home two minutes from time. Talk about a crucial goal. While Hamburg skirted the demotion trapdoor, Wolfsburg had to compete in the relegation/promotion play-off versus Eintracht Braunschweig, which, fortunately for the Wolves, they won.

In truth, Wolfsburg was the wrong club at the wrong time for the teenage Osimhen. Back then Wolfsburg were a team in sharp decline and, with Mario Gomez and Divock Origi ahead of him in the striker pecking order, there was just no room for the Nigerian. Knee, calf and shoulder injuries only served to further complicate his task. "In hindsight, it naturally was not a good transfer," Wolfsburg director of sport Jorg Schmadtke later admitted.

By the 2018 off-season, Osimhen had made up his mind to cut all ties with Wolfsburg. He had trials that summer with Belgian sides Club Brugge and Zulte Waregem, but once again found the fates conspiring against him, negotiations running aground when the youngster contracted malaria. As luck would have it, another Belgian club was waiting to pounce, and in late August Charleroi agreed to take him on a single-season loan.

Given young Osimhen's ghost-like form with Wolfsburg and his dubious medical history, the management at Charleroi knew they were taking a calculated risk with the Nigerian. But it would not take long for any apprehension to melt away. So impressive was he in his first-ever training session with the Zebras, that coach Felice Mazzu could not believe his eyes, telling anyone within earshot that the new boy had the potential to play for Real Madrid or Manchester United.

Keen to ease his new signing in gently, Mazzu initially used Osimhen as an impact substitute. Not that he was destined to be on the leash for long. Within weeks, he had taken over from Jeremy Perbet and Adama Niane as the team's first-choice centre-forward, marking his first start with an audacious backheel goal in a home draw with Waasland-Beveren. A month later, he was again the hero, netting twice in the last five minutes to turn a deficit against Zulte Waregem

Under-17 World Cup...Osimhen (R) celebrates after winning the U17 World Cup in 2015

Success story... Osimhen shone on loan at Charleroi

> "In hindsight, it naturally was not a good transfer"
>
> **Wolfsburg director of sport Jorg Schmadtke on signing Osimhen**

into a thrilling Zebras victory.

He had arrived in Charleroi on tip-toes, timid, uncertain and far from assured what the future held. Even in his wildest dreams, he could not have imagined the sea-change which would unfold, the ultra-rapid transition from Wolfsburg bust to much-acclaimed leader of the Charleroi line, a brilliant mix of fearsome shooting, electric pace and dynamic channel running. A major threat when charging forward from deep, he wanted the ball delivered as early and accurately as possible and very much had his wish. With 19 Belgian league goals, he earned praise aplenty and third-place in the national marksmanship charts.

Peruvian international attacking midfielder Cristian Benavente, Victor's favourite assist provider at Charleroi, succinctly sung Osimhen's praises in Belgium's *Sport/Foot* magazine in March 2019. "He has a real instinct for goalscoring. He knows how to make the difference. He's so quick, and in the air he's an animal."

In truth, mid-table Charleroi were never going to make Osimhen's loan move permanent. Word of his rip-roaring exploits quickly travelled far beyond Belgium. English sides Southampton and Watford had him on their watch-list, as did Serie A's Atalanta. In a sure sign that Osimhen was on the up, rumours abounded in January 2019 that Milan were ready to make a €15m offer for him.

With Milan in the crosshairs of financial fair play enforcers, the transfer deal had to be put on ice, allowing Luis Campos – then the head of recruitment at Ligue 1 Lille, conveniently only 70-odd miles from Charleroi – to pick up the pieces, securing a €12m deal in August 2019. Campos, now working at Paris Saint-Germain, knows all

Impressive...Osimhen smashed home 18 goals in one season for Lille

about extracting maximum profit from a deal and certainly did so in this instance. Thanks to 18 competitive goals for Lille in 2019-20, Osimhen suddenly became a top-drawer commodity, his market value going through the roof and Napoli happy to pay more than six multiples of Lille's original purchase price.

Wherever Osimhen plays his club football next season, he will be sticking religiously to the recipe that has brought him so much renown and success: work ethic and goal galore. No doubt inspired by a difficult childhood back home in Lagos – the premature death of his mother, father's unemployment and general hand-to-mouth existence – Victor is the most hungry of warriors, combative, fearless and willing to run all day. "The determination of my elder brother has rubbed off on me," he told *Sport/Foot* in May 2019. "He always devoted his energy to helping our family and I try to copy this approach to his life when I'm on the pitch. I don't give up easily. I always try to go right to the limit, to the point where I almost fall down with fatigue. If I don't do that, if I don't put my foot on the gas, it's as if I'm not playing in a match."

> "He has a real instinct for goalscoring. He knows how to make the difference. He's so quick, and in the air he's an animal"
>
> **Osimhen's ex-Charleroi team-mate Cristian Benavente**

Eye-catching... Osimhen scores his first Champions League goal, against Chelsea

From the ***archives***

In our March 2021 issue, Emmanuel Amuneke, Nigeria's coach at the 2015 Under-17 World Cup, told *World Soccer* all about working with Osimhen…

RIGHT: Starlet... Osimhen in action at the 2015 Under-17 World Cup in Chile

BELOW: Emmanuel Emenike...the Golden Eaglets' coach at that youth tournament

"You could see the determination in him right away. At that particular time you're just looking for intelligence, for decision-making with and without the ball. I think these are the key things that I was mostly emphasising and looking for, and Victor had them. Most importantly, he was coachable, and he was hungry.

"We looked at Victor as a striker and how we could improve his positioning, his running, his realisation that there are times you only need to touch the ball once, his decision-making in pressing situations. We had to work on all that, and thankfully he was able to adapt and demonstrate at the World Cup the quality in him.

"As you watched him at that World Cup, you quickly discovered something about him. As a striker, it is not common to see a tall player like him, and at that age, with very good coordination in terms of his running and contact with the ball. Some tall players are good with their head, but Victor had the full complement of qualities you'd want in a striker.

"People will always have doubts, but Victor's belief in himself helped when he moved to Wolfsburg. Things didn't work out the way people were expecting, and probably a lot of people might have considered him one of those players at youth level who doesn't fulfil their potential. But he remained calm, and now he's with one of the best teams in Europe.

"If he works hard, remains humble and keeps the right associates, there is no limit to the level he can reach."

Victor Osimhen

NIGERIA

NAPOLI'S RECORD SIGNINGS

€75m VICTOR OSIMHEN *2020 (from Lille)*

€45m HIRVING LOZANO *2019 (from PSV)*

€39m GONZALO HIGUAIN *2013 (from Real Madrid)*

CAF YOUTH PLAYER OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNERS

2019 **ACHRAF HAKIMI** (Morocco)

2018 **ACHRAF HAKIMI** (Morocco)

2017 **PATSON DAKA** (Zambia)

2016 **ALEX IWOBI** (Nigeria)

2015 **VICTOR OSIMHEN** (Nigeria)

25

CAPS

GOALS

15

NAPOLI'S TOP SCORERS

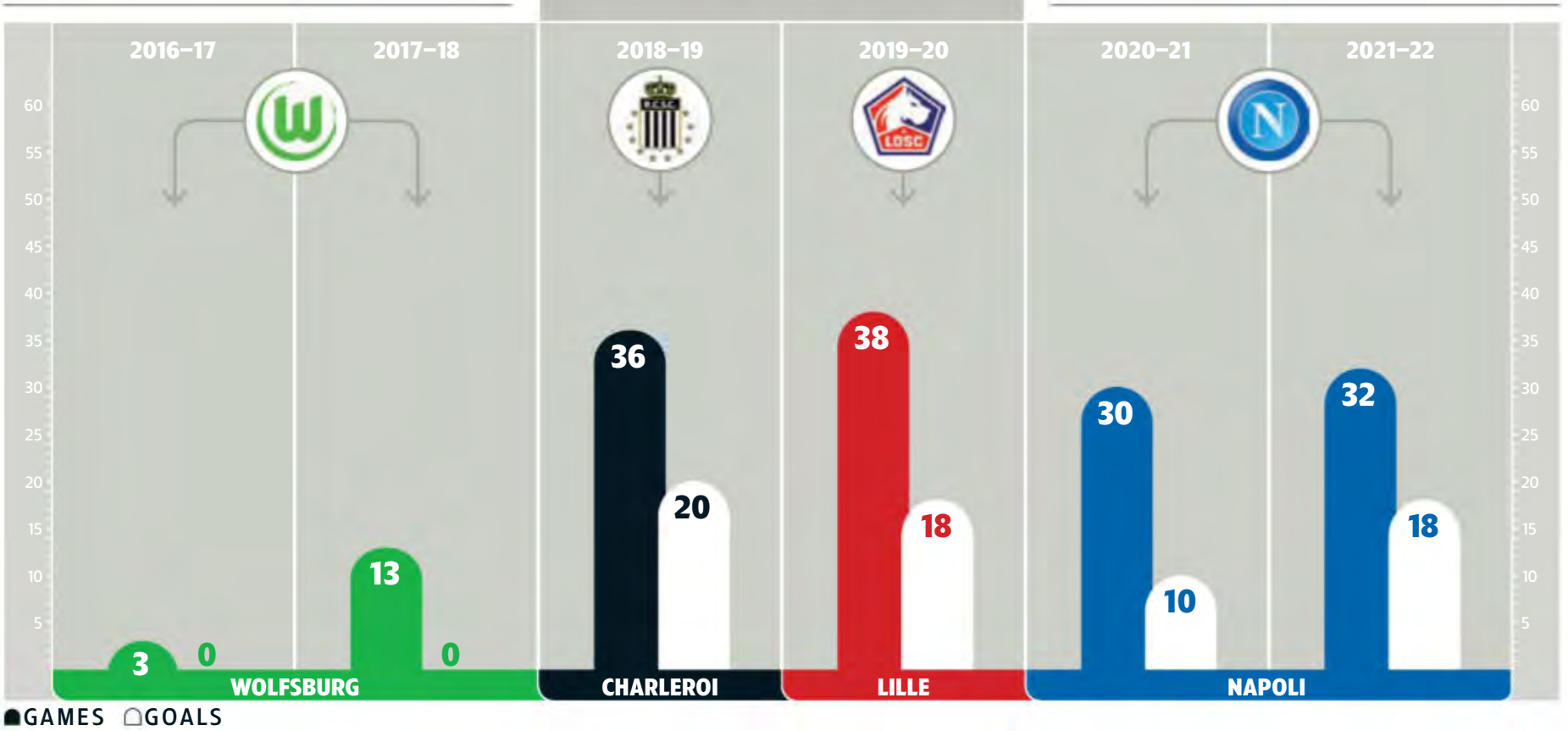
PLAYERS	Goals
Dries **MERTENS**	148
Lorenzo **INSIGNE**	122
Marek **HAMSIK**	121
Diego **MARADONA**	115
Attila **SALLUSTRO**	108
Edinson **CAVANI**	104
Antonio **VOJAK**	103
CARECA	96
Gonzalo **HIGUAIN**	91
Jose **ALTAFINI**	89
Jose **CALLEJON**	82
Giuseppe **SAVOLDI**	77
CANE	70
Luis **VINICIO**	70
Victor OSIMHEN	**54***

(Correct as of April 28)

SERIE A AFRICAN GOAL RECORD

21

Osimhen is only the second African player to score 21 Serie A goals in one season, after Samuel Eto'o in 2010-11



Words Nick Bidwell

Ismael GHARBI

Paris Saint-Germain

In a sentence
Pocket-sized PSG playmaker with the capacity for imaginative assists and ruthless finishing, notching six UEFA Youth League goals this term.

What they say
"He's a youngster with a strong personality. He displays this strength of character on the pitch. He's a leader who loves a challenge."
Said Aigoun, ex-PSG academy coach

"His most important quality is that when he's on the ball in the opposition penalty area, time seems to stop for him."
Mathieu Bodmer, ex-PSG midfielder and now Le Havre's sporting director

The story so far
Something of a citizen of the world, Gharbi was born and raised in Paris by a Tunisian father and a Spanish mother. He cut his footballing teeth in the infant ranks of Paris FC prior to joining PSG's academy at the age of 12 in 2016, and quickly made meteoric progress with the perennial French champions.

His first taste of the senior game came when he was included as a non-playing substitute in a crunch Champions League quarter-final tie away to Bayern Munich in April 2021 (three days before his 17th birthday). Four months later he made his debut, brought on as a late substitute versus Lille in the Champions Trophy. In May 2022 he made his Ligue 1 debut, against Troyes, again coming off the bench at the death. In total he made four appearances for PSG's first team last season, all as a substitute, and has been used similarly in 2022-23. In January he set up a goal in the French Cup victory over Chateauroux, his first senior start.

Eligible for France, Tunisia or Spain, he represented the former at Under-18 level, but has since represented the Spanish Under-18 and Under-19 sides.

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT GHARBI

- He first made headlines in France when starring for PSG's Under-12s at the prestigious Danone Nations Cup in Marrakesh. He was the youngest player in a PSG squad that finished a creditable third.
- Eligible for France, Spain and Tunisia, last summer his father declared on Tunisian radio that Ismael would play for the North African nation "as soon as possible".
- Regularly invited to train with the PSG first team, he was caught by TV cameras offering a warm welcome in Spanish to the newly-arrived Lionel Messi in the summer of 2021. "If you need anything, I'm here for you."

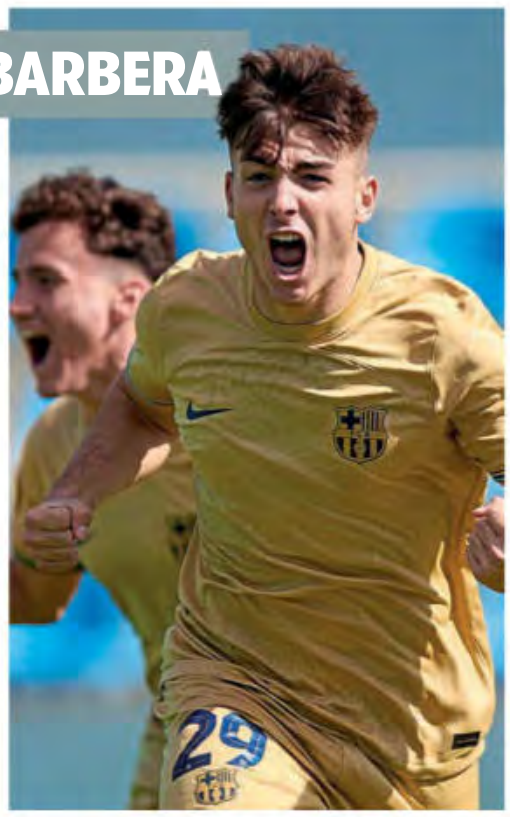
> "When he's on the ball in the opposition penalty area, time seems to stop for him"
> **Mathieu Bodmer, former PSG midfielder**

The next step
A loan move to a Ligue 1 outfit is in the works. Under contract with PSG until the summer of 2025, he had looked set to join Nice on loan for the second half of this season, only for the deal to be scuppered by last-minute administrative problems. Although a die-hard PSG fan, he must surely know that the Parc des Princes club has a reputation for not trusting graduates of their academy. In recent seasons, hot prospects such as Xavi Simons, Arnaud Kalimuendo, Tanguy Nianzou and Adil Aouchiche have had to move elsewhere for regular first-team football and Gharbi may follow them. A number of leading Premier League sides are watching closely.

Strengths
His effervescence, technical excellence, final-ball subtlety and single-mindedness when going in on goal. Outstanding on the turn and in tight spots. At his best as a number ten, but can shine on the flanks too, particularly on the right.

Weaknesses
A marked lack of bodily presence. He still needs to fill out physically.

Victor BARBERA



Barcelona
Too sharp and cunning to be denied for long, the 18-year-old Catalan striker simply could not stop scoring in this season's Youth League, netting seven goals in his first four fixtures. In the box he is a true poacher, but he also has the speed and smarts to work effectively in wide areas. Several clubs are hoping to prise him away from the Camp Nou.

Andrea BOZZOLAN

Milan
Accomplished left-back who combines defensive toughness with a pronounced sense of adventure. The 19-year-old has a wise head on his shoulders and very much fits the bill in terms of his technique and ability to read the game. Played impressively for the Milan first team in workouts against Arsenal and Liverpool during a mid-season camp in Dubai.

Karim KONATE

Red Bull Salzburg
Admirers of the 19-year-old claim he is the most talented Ivorian striker to emerge since Didier Drogba. And on the evidence of his goal-getting prowess in the Youth League this term – notably when grabbing a hat-trick in a 5-1 win over Chelsea in October – the suggestion is anything but hype. The complete package of power, finesse and red-zone instincts.

Mexx MEERDINK

AZ
Many Dutch football insiders consider the flame-haired forward the number one teenage talent in the country. He boasts all the ingredients of the complete striker: an unquenchable thirst for goals, ice cool in the box, aerially powerful and excellent in his hold-up play. He plays with a certain swagger, always wanting the ball and confident enough to spray it around.

Joel ORDONEZ

Club Brugge
In his first season in Europe after leaving Independiente del Valle in his native Ecuador, this resourceful and combative centre-back has adapted very well indeed to his new surroundings, doing especially well in the Youth League. Club Brugge had to bid high (€3.9 million) to secure the services of a youngster who also had Milan, Ajax, PSV and Benfica on his trail.

Nico PAZ

Real Madrid
The 18-year-old son of former Argentina centre-back Pablo Paz is a completely different type of player to his father. Nico is a box-to-box midfielder blessed with tremendous stamina, dynamism, vision and a fine left foot. Weighs in with more than his fair share of goals, forever a menace when cutting inside from the right to unleash a fierce shot.

Goncalo RIBEIRO

Porto
Calm, authoritative and agile, the goalkeeper may only be 17 but performs with the maturity and unfazed attitude of a battle-hardened senior pro. A Portugal Under-17 and Under-19 international, he has been with Porto for over a decade. At 16 years, six months and 31 days, he is the youngest player in Portuguese second division history.

Julian RIJKHOFF

Borussia Dortmund
The irrepressible 18-year-old Dutch striker has been piling up the goals this season for Borussia Dortmund's Under-19s, including five strikes in the UEFA Youth League. A veritable finishing machine, he already is being mentioned as the man to lead the *Oranje* line at the 2026 World Cup. Controversially quit Ajax for Dortmund in 2021 and has since racked up over 30 goals in the Under-19 Bundesliga.

HOST HUNTING

After Indonesian football suffered another huge blow by having the hosting rights for this year's Under-20 World Cup stripped, FIFA was forced to look elsewhere…

Words: John Duerden & Tim Vickery

Indonesian football fans had endured years of mismanagement, incompetence and corruption even before last October's Kanjuruhan Stadium tragedy that cost 135 lives. It was a shocking disaster but, for those in what is arguably Asia's most passionate football nation, not that surprising. There was one bright spot on the horizon and a chance for a new start for the game. The FIFA Under-20 World Cup in May was to be by far the biggest sporting tournament to be held in the world's fourth-most populous country. It was not just seen as a turning point but a chance to show an international audience a colourful, vibrant and diverse culture on and off the pitch.

And then, just like that, it was gone. All because of a row that started in Bali, one of three islands – along with Java and Sumatra – due to host to the 24 teams and the location of the draw that was to be made on March 31. A week earlier Wayan Koster, governor of Bali, a mainly Hindu island in the Muslim majority nation, wrote to Indonesia's sports minister protesting the presence of Israel in the competition and reminding of the country's support of Palestine:

Another blow for Indonesian football… having hosting rights stripped came just months after the Kanjuruhan Stadium tragedy (aftermath pictured above)

"[There is no] diplomatic relationship between the Indonesian government and the Israeli government...we request the Minister adopt a policy forbidding the Israeli team from competing in Bali," read the letter. Ganjar Pranowo, governor of Central Java, made similar comments.

FIFA cancelled the draw five days out and alarm bells started to ring in Jakarta. There was talk of nearby Malaysia, when the country was stripped of hosting the 2019 World Para Swimming Championships after refusing to let Israeli athletes enter.

Erick Thohir, the chairman of Indonesia's FA (PSSI), quickly talked to president Joko Widodo, who said that Indonesia's foreign policy would be unaffected by hosting a football tournament. Thohir, a former owner of Internazionale, jetted off to meet Gianni Infantino in a bid to allay concerns. It didn't work and, on March 29, just two days before the date of the planned draw, the dreaded official announcement came. "FIFA has decided, due to the current circumstances, to remove Indonesia as the host of the FIFA U20 World Cup 2023," the statement said, and that was that.

THE DRAW

Group A	
Argentina	Guatemala
Uzbekistan	New Zealand

Group B	
United States	Fiji
Ecuador	Slovakia

Group C	
Senegal	Israel
Japan	Colombia

Group D	
Italy	Nigeria
Brazil	Dominican Rep

Group E	
Uruguay	England
Iraq	Tunisia

Group F	
France	Gambia
South Korea	Honduras

The top two teams from each group advance to the knockout rounds, along with the four best third-placed teams

Koster, who along with Ganjar has been accused of political manoeuvring and playing to more conservative sections of society ahead of the 2024 elections, quickly came under fire but told reporters that he was not to blame: "This is not my personal stance. This is also the stance from the government," he said. "Please ask those who have the authority."

When FIFA pulled the plug, fans and players – who now find themselves kicked out of the tournament – were devastated. Hokky Caraka, a member of the U20 team, vented his fury on social media, replying to a post by Ganjar. "We just wanted to take our career in a better direction, but our stepping stone to do that has been destroyed by you," Hokky wrote, in a comment that was later removed. Team-mate Rabbani Tasnim also took aim at the politicians: "Are you satisfied by destroying one of our biggest dreams? [Our weeks of training] were made to be for naught just in a moment because of your political reasoning," he stated.

The national government and federation have not avoided criticism, with critics saying the country's position on the matter should have been made clear long before Israel's U19 team reached the final of last year's European Championship to secure their place at the U20 World Cup.

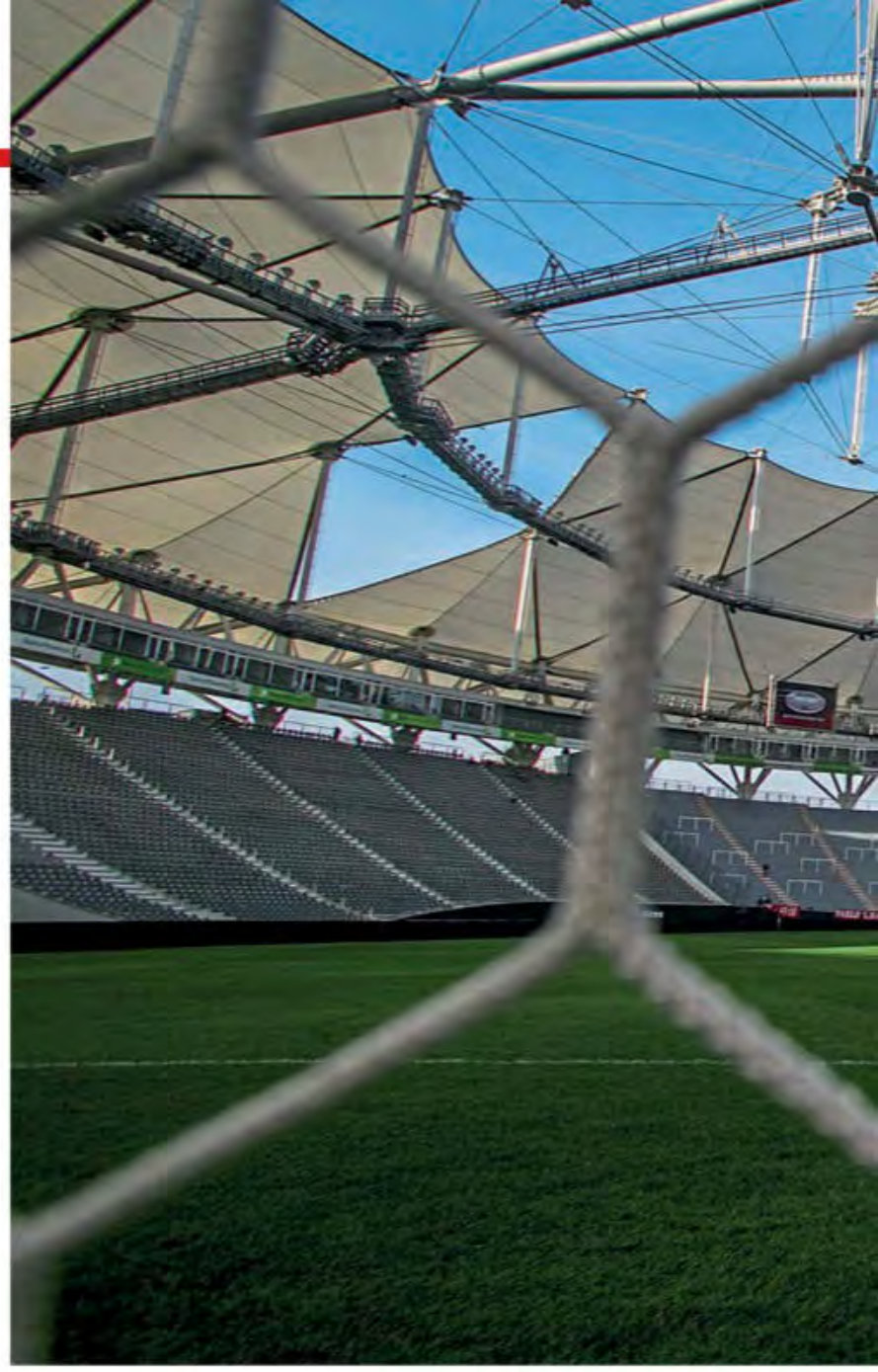
It could have been worse. Initially, FIFA threatened sanctions. This raised fears of an international ban, reminiscent of the one-year suspension from 2015 to 2016 that caused immense damage to Indonesian football. Next January, the senior national team will compete at the Asian Cup for the first time since 2007, having qualified with the help of a number of promising young talents, and the prospect of being barred from participating was a devastating one. Qualification for the 2026 World Cup, where Asia will have at least eight representatives, is also due to start later this year.

Eventually, FIFA announced that there would be no punishment. That, at least, is something, but positives are hard to find. After years of misery and negative stories in Indonesian football, a tournament that was meant to signal the start of a new era and show the world that the country could host major events has been taken away just weeks before it was due to start. It is hard to say where Indonesian football, for all its massive potential, goes from here.

The decision to replace Indonesia as hosts was made at the end of March, giving FIFA a little over six weeks to find a replacement. After interest from Qatar, attention turned to South America: first Peru, who had been set to host the U17 World Cup at the end of this year, and then Argentina.

Four years ago, Brazil won a World Cup for which they did not even qualify. After failing to secure a place for the 2019 U17 World Cup, they were able to step in and save the day when Peru were stripped of the right to host. Staging the show gave them an automatic place in the tournament, which they ended up winning.

Now it is Argentina hoping for something similar, this time at U20 level. At the start of the year, Javier Mascherano and his young charges were unable to gain one of South America's fours slots in Indonesia, flopping at the 2023 South American U20 Championship. The ex-Argentina, Liverpool and Barcelona midfielder's first coaching job appeared to have ended in failure. He resigned, but was talked into staying on, and the wheel of fortune appears to have spun his way. Indonesia's loss is Argentina's gain. They are the late replacements, giving Mascherano and company a second shot at glory.



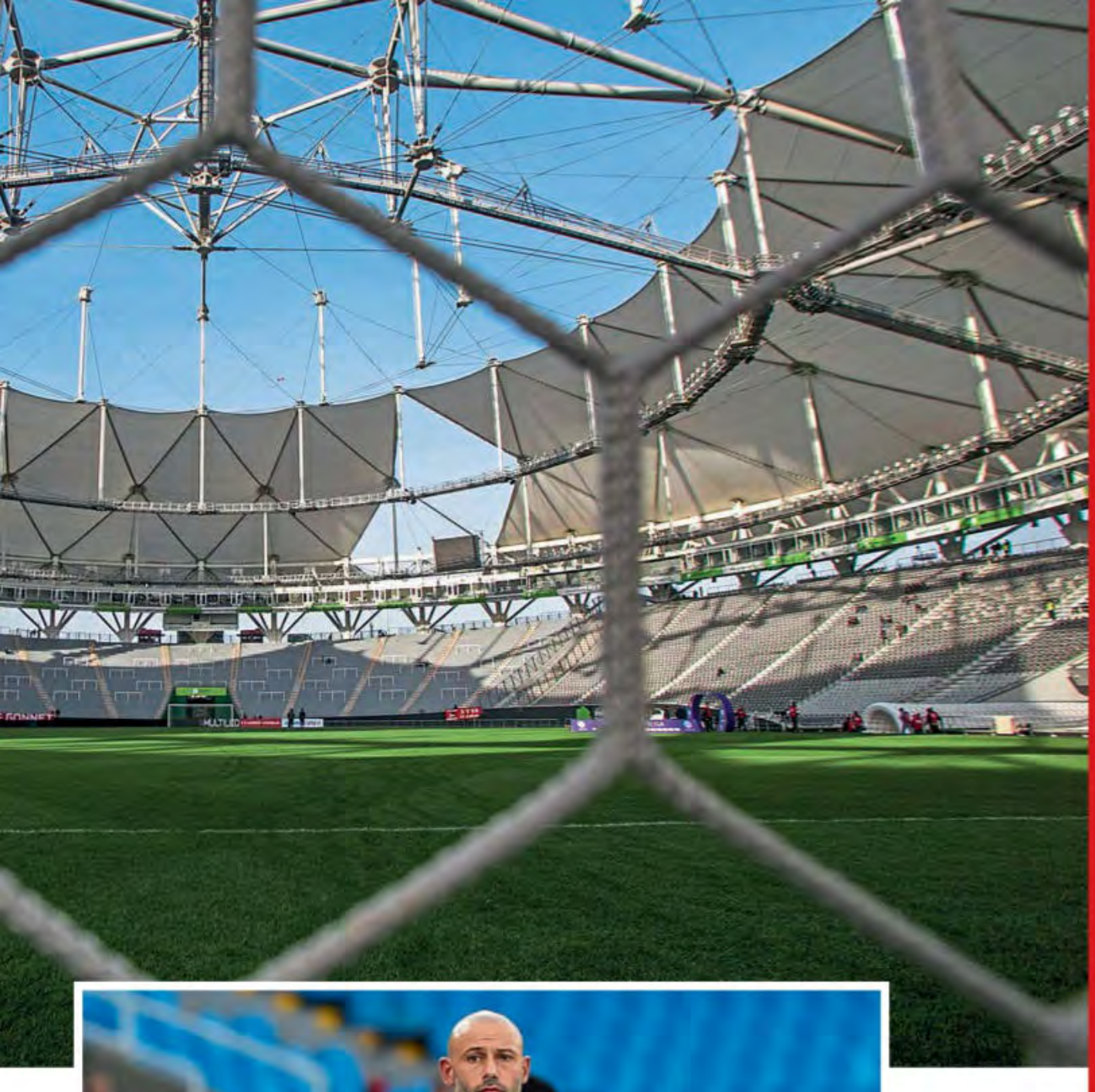
Final host... Estadio Ciudad de La Plata

Anti-Israel... protesters took to the streets of Jakarta before Indonesia had the U20 World Cup taken away

Argentina's new status as U20 World Cup hosts has a great deal to do with the euphoria engendered by triumph in the senior tournament in Qatar. It was a long, hot summer of celebration between the victory parades late in December and the two friendlies staged at the end of March. Between those two matches came the draw for the Copa Libertadores. The World Cup-winning squad were there to be honoured, and also present were local FA boss Chiqui Tapia, CONMEBOL's Alejandro Dominguez and FIFA president Gianni Infantino. If a replacement host was needed for the tournament, it was here that Argentina's claims started to gain force.

Tapia could base his argument on the attempts to help decentralise Argentinian football in the 21st century, reducing an excessive concentration on Buenos Aires. A number of stadiums – capacity between 20,000 and 30,000 – have been built recently in towns a long way to the north of Argentina's commanding capital.

There is the ultra modern stadium of Santiago del Estero, opened in 2021, which hosted Argentina's senior side against Curacao at the end of March. To the south of Santiago del Estero there are San Juan, which has hosted the Argentine national teams in both football and rugby, and Mendoza, built



Reinstated... Argentina U20 coach Javier Mascherano

Venues

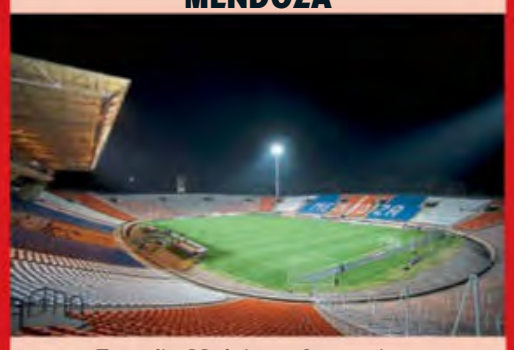
LA PLATA

Estadio Unico Diego Armando Maradona
Capacity: 53,000

SANTIAGO DEL ESTERO

Estadio Unico Madre de Ciudades
Capacity: 42,000

MENDOZA



Estadio Malvinas Argentinas
Capacity: 42,000

SAN JUAN

Estadio San Juan del Bicentenario
Capacity: 25,286

for the 1978 World Cup and remodelled for the 2011 Copa America.

There was obviously the need for one stadium with a bigger capacity for prestige matches, such as the semi-finals and final. The obvious candidate was the ground in La Plata, an hour's drive from Buenos Aires, which can comfortably seat 53,000. Built in 2003, it was originally shared by the two local clubs, Estudiantes and Gimnasia y Esgrima. But the force of tradition ended up pulling both La Plata clubs back to their original homes. And so the relatively modern Estadio Ciudad de La Plata (or Estadio Unico Diego Armando Maradona, as it was officially renamed in December 2020) is idle, and can be given over exclusively to FIFA for the duration of the tournament. This, incidentally, is true of most of the host grounds – either they are not in regular use or the local club can easily move to a temporary replacement. This availability of the stadiums on an exclusive basis was one of Argentina's most effective selling points.

And there is a wider context than merely rescuing Mascherano's U20 team from the consequences of its own elimination at the end of January. Hosting this tournament could also kick-start South America's campaign to celebrate the centenary of the senior World Cup in 2030. Recently that quest had appeared to run out of steam, to come across as a romantic dream rather than a genuine proposal – and it was clearly under threat from Morocco's decision to go in with Spain and Portugal. Although the World Cup began, of course, in Uruguay, it is Argentina that would bear the brunt of hosting a 2030 competition (the proposal also includes Chile and Paraguay). And so, if Argentina can rise to the challenge in 2023, there is just a chance that it will mean that some of the planet's youngsters in action in May and June will be back in South America seven years later.

U20 World Cup: stars to watch

With it not being part of the senior FIFA calendar and clubs under no obligation to cooperate, it's a battle to the wire to get players released for the Under-20 World Cup. **Tim Vickery, Mark Gleeson, John Duerden** and **Nick Bidwell** pick out some of the youngsters who, if released, should be well worth watching in Argentina…

1 Giuseppe AMBROSINO

(ITALY)

Through instinct and execution, the young Neapolitan striker is a first-rate converter of chances. On Napoli's books but on loan this campaign at Serie B outfits Como and Cittadella, he has an excellent record as a finisher: the leading goalscorer in the domestic youth championship last season (19) and regularly on the scoresheet for Italy in this season's Under-20 Elite League.

All the right people rate him. From *Azzurri* Under-20 boss Carmine Nunziata to Napoli first-team coach Luciano Spalletti, who selected him for bench duty in Serie A and the Europa League last season.

Part of Italy's squad at last summer's Under-19 European Championship, the 19-year-old striker scored and helped guide Nunziata's side to the semi-finals – where they went on to lose to winners England – while Roberto Mancini called the youngster up for a training camp in December aimed at honing the country's most talented youngsters.

2 VITOR ROQUE

(BRAZIL)

Everyone's eyes will be on Vitor Roque, whose name is on the wish list of many European giants. Young enough for the next U20 World Cup, but there is little chance of him still playing age restriction football in 2025. Picked up by Athletico Paranaense from Cruzeiro last year, he already had the experience of playing a Copa Libertadores final before enhancing his reputation still further in the South American U20 Championship, which determined the qualifiers for this competition. Quick, strong and skilful, he could be the answer to his country's prayers in the centre-forward position, and made his senior debut in March.

3 Solomon AGBALAKA
(NIGERIA)

The left-back was twice chosen as man of the match at the U20 Africa Cup of Nations – which acted as qualification for these finals – and emerged as a player of considerable ability. Last season Agbalaka played for MFM FC, who finished bottom of the Nigerian league, but the experience for a teenager stood him in good stead. Nigeria U20 coach Ladan Bosso shifted him from centre-back to the left side, where he impressed in Egypt with his passing range, dribbling and technique. He is now in the lower leagues in Lagos but is expected to be at an overseas club sooner rather than later.

4 Otabek BOYMURODOV
(UZBEKISTAN)

Uzbekistan won the U20 Asian Cup in March – which, like its African counterpart, also decided its region's representatives for this World Cup – and the victory was a huge deal for the Central Asian nation who have sorely underachieved at senior level. The success on home soil was based on the most miserly of defences marshalled by the goalkeeper of the tournament, one who is following in a long line of talented keepers in the country. It was no surprise that Boymurodov won the Best Goalkeeper award: he played all six games and conceded just one goal, saving three penalties in the semi-final win over South Korea and making some stellar saves in the final against Iraq.

5 Oscar CORTES
(COLOMBIA)

A winger happiest on his natural right side but also able to cross to the other flank, the Millonarios man was one of the major successes of the qualification campaign – full of thrust, running at defenders and posing a real threat on goal. He was Colombia's top goalscorer at the 2023 South American U20 Championship with three strikes, where *Los Cafeteros* finished third behind Brazil and Uruguay to book their place at the World Cup finals.

Since the qualifiers, Cortes has developed into an important player for his club – Colombia will trust that he is not now too important to be released for the U20 tournament.

6 Pape Demba DIOP
(SENEGAL)

Top scorer at the U20 AFCON in Egypt with five goals, Diop has already been signed by Belgian club Zulte Waregem, who have given him a small taste of first-team action this season but are hoping he is going to burst through in the next campaign. Alternatively, he may attract a lucrative sale after this tournament, having already received interest after the continental youth championship. His midfield role, combining clever playmaking duties with accurate finishing, saw his Senegal team-mates nickname him "De Bruyne".

7 Edison AZCONA
(DOMINICAN REPUBLIC)

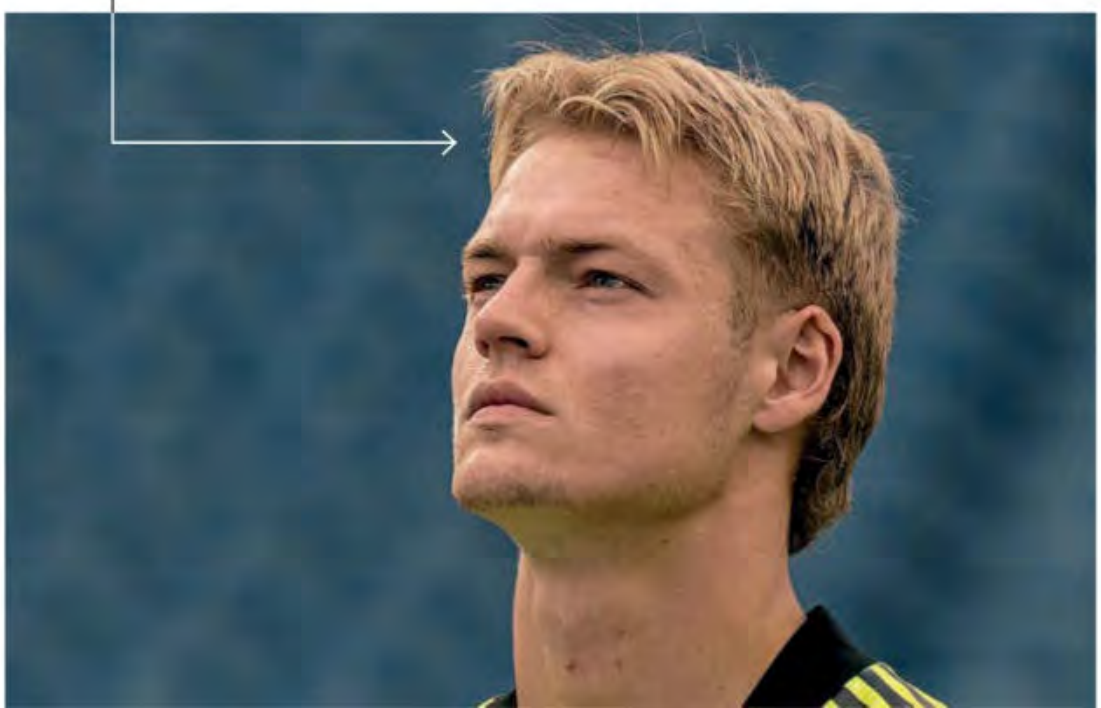
In their first taste of a FIFA tournament, the Dominicans will be looking to their skipper for inspiration. Normally lining up in a number ten role for the Under-20s, he is the player who makes the team tick, dictating the tempo and impressive when spreading the play wide. As he proved at the 2022 CONCACAF U20 finals – where Dominican Republic finished runners-up to the United States to book their place in Argentina – he also has a knack for important goals, scoring the penalty-kick winner in a 5-4 victory over El Salvador in the last 16, and netting against Guatemala in the semis in both normal time and the penalty shootout. He is the first graduate of the Inter Miami academy to play in MLS.

8 Nabil BEGG
(FIJI)

The willowy left-winger or attacking midfielder looks to have all the makings of a future star: great close control, superb one-on-one ability, tons of inventiveness and a flair for finishing. Fittingly, he scored the goal that clinched Fiji's place in these finals, volleying home the only goal of the game in a win over New Caledonia in the semi-final of the 2022 Oceania U19 Championship in Tahiti. He won his first major title at club level late last year, prominent in Ba's triumph in the Pacific Cup, a four-team tournament involving teams from Fiji, Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

9 Chris BRADY
(USA)

This year is a momentous one for the 19-year-old goalkeeper who, as well as enjoying his inaugural season as a Major League Soccer starter with Chicago Fire, will be aiming for recognition on a global stage at these finals. It should come as no surprise that he is frequently praised for his maturity. He has already been a professional for three years, quitting high school to sign a Homegrown Player contract with Chicago Fire. Tall, athletic, authoritative and boasting a solid technical base, he had a successful stint in the US third tier in 2020-21 with the Forward Madison club.



10 Mohamed-Ali CHO
(FRANCE)

France U20 coach Landry Chauvin will be keeping his fingers crossed that the incredibly talented Real Sociedad striker finally manages to stay healthy. Since joining Sociedad from Ligue 1 Angers last summer in a €15 million deal, the skilful and pacy Paris-born frontrunner has had more than his fair share of injuries, missing large chunks of the season with hamstring and ankle problems. Now fit and firing, he could be *Les Bleuets'* secret weapon. He spent part of his childhood living in London, and has played in the PSG and Everton academies.

11 ALEXSANDER
(BRAZIL)

Fluminense's youth development work has really excelled in recent times, especially in producing wide strikers. But Alexsander is something different: an all-round footballer with the intelligence, talent and versatility to fill a number of roles. In qualification, Alexsander often operated high up the field, at times playing off the centre-forward. Left-footed, he is a central midfielder by nature, but successfully improvised in the Fluminense first team as a left-back. The return of Marcelo may end up increasing his importance; Alexsander can provide cover for the attacking forays of the former Real Madrid superstar.

12 KANG Seong-jin
(SOUTH KOREA)

The winger, who loves to cut in from the right to shoot with his left foot, has already made quite a splash in South Korean football. As well as starring at the U20 Asian Cup – where the Taeguk Warriors went on to lose on penalties to Uzbekistan in the semi-finals – he has already made his senior debut, scoring twice against Hong Kong in the 2022 East Asian Football Federation (EAFF) Cup. Kang has already been linked with Europe after becoming a regular for FC Seoul, the former powerhouse who are trying to get back to the top of the K-League after some disappointing results in recent years.

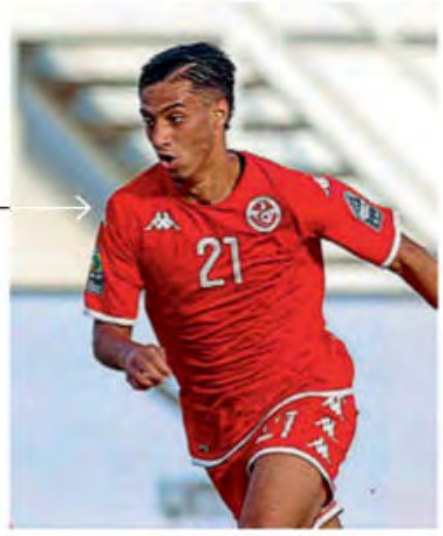
13 Carney CHUKWUEMEKA
(ENGLAND)

The brilliant Austrian-born midfield all-rounder cost Chelsea a reported £20m when they prised him away from Aston Villa last summer. After winning caps with England's U17s and U18s, he established himself as a go-to player for the U19s, particularly visible during the triumphant 2022 European Championship campaign, a tournament in which he scored three goals, including one in the final win over Israel. A ball-carrier of great proficiency, he has dribbling ability to die for and certainly can pick out a pass.

14 Jhon DURAN
(COLOMBIA)

Strong and quick left-footed striker with the potential to be both the bludgeon and the rapier. Started at Envigado – ever proficient at youth development – in his home country, then earned a move to MLS with Chicago Fire before quickly moving on again to Aston Villa in January of this year. The transfer to England came on the eve of February's South American U20 Championship, thwarting hopes that he would return after his medical. Scored his first goal for the senior national team in March. The 19-year-old is seen as fundamental to the future, and Colombia are praying that come mid-May Villa will feel sufficiently secure to release him.

15 Jibril OTHMAN
(TUNISIA)



Born in Saint-Etienne, and making his first-team debut for the Ligue 2 club this season at the age of 18, Othman is one of many young players of Tunisian heritage assiduously scouted from the ranks of the diaspora in France. The striker was not difficult for the Tunisian football federation to uncover, having already been selected for France at both U16 and U17 level. Tunisia persuaded him to switch his allegiance and he made his U20 debut for the North Africans last September against (who else?) France.

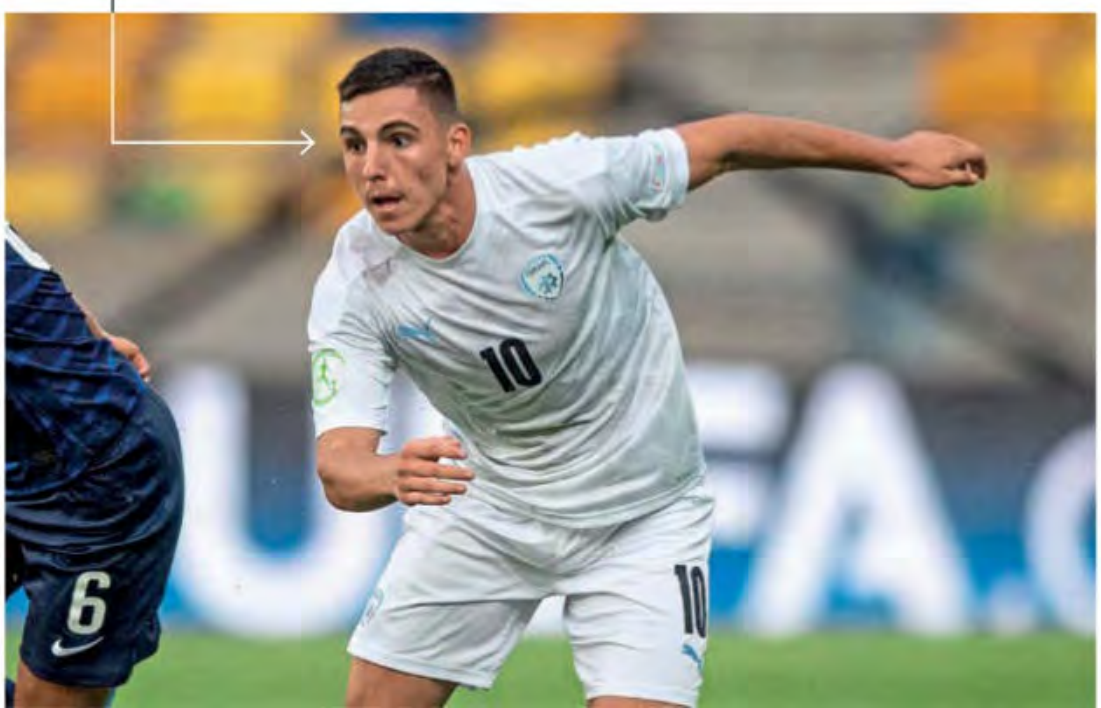
Speed and technical ability are his major assets, qualities which helped him top Tunisia's scoring charts at the 2023 U20 AFCON finals, including goals against Zambia in the groups and Congo in the last eight.

16 Lucas GOURNA-DOUATH
(FRANCE)

Yet another diamond to emerge from the deep reservoir of talent that is the Greater Paris region, Lucas Gourna-Douath has a lot in common with one of his favourite players, Chelsea and France midfielder N'Golo Kante: the same position on the field, the same incredible work-rate, ball-winning bite and tactical awareness. Possessing a very analytical side to his personality, always looking to find ways to enhance his game, his work without the ball has much improved, as has his passing. Last July he joined Red Bull Salzburg from Saint-Etienne in a €13m deal, a record fee for the Austrian champions.

17 Oscar GLOUKH
(ISRAEL)

If he continues on his current trajectory, this tremendously gifted attacking midfielder could well turn out to be one of Israel's most decorated pros. Nimble on the ball, imaginative and boasting a powerful shot from distance, he was quite magnificent as Israel qualified for their first-ever U20 World Cup finals, contributing three goals and two assists to his country's silver medal at last year's U19 European Championship. As well as featuring in the Team of the Tournament, his strike in the final against England was voted the competition's best. Recently left Maccabi Tel Aviv for the Red Bull Salzburg star factory.



18 Jay HERDMAN
(NEW ZEALAND)

An outstanding attacking midfielder, Herdman's decision to switch national team allegiance from Canada – for whom he was qualified through residency – to New Zealand's Junior All Whites has paid off in spades. At last year's U19 OFC Championship in Tahiti, his first tournament in NZ colours, the diminutive number ten gave a string of bright, lively and technically accomplished performances – so impressive that he was voted Player of the Tournament. Born in the NZ city of Invercargill, the Vancouver Whitecaps player is the son of Canada's English coach John Herdman.

19 Sebastian KOSA
(SLOVAKIA)

The tall and commanding central defender is rated the best young prospect in Slovakia. The Spartak Trnava stopper has yet to play for the senior national team, though a first cap cannot be far away after he was called up for a training camp late in 2022. A Trnava first-teamer for the best part of three seasons, he has sufficient technique and game intelligence to play further forward, and has turned out for his club in a variety of midfield roles. Recently made headlines when scoring for Trnava in a Slovak Cup semi-final and will be hoping for a second successive trophy in a repeat of last year's final v Slovan Bratislava – three weeks before the U20s kick off.

20 Arquimides ORDONEZ
(GUATEMALA)

The FC Cincinnati striker is regarded as the future of the Guatemala national team and lived up to that heavy reputation at last year's CONCACAF U20 Championship with five goals in just six games. Whenever Guatemala needed a goal he duly obliged, on target in all three group games – the only player to do so at the tournament – the quarter-final victory against Mexico and the penalty shootout loss to Dominican Republic in the semi-final. He made his full debut for Guatemala last autumn in a friendly against Colombia. Born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, he qualifies for Guatemala through his father.

21 Kevin PAREDES
(USA)

The extremely versatile left-sided performer is capable of delivering the goods as a winger, in a more disciplined wide midfield role or at full-back. Recently stood out for the U20s in a friendly defeat to England, providing both a goal and an assist. From the state of Virginia, he came through the youth ranks of MLS side D.C. United, going on to hit the heights with the first team before Bundesliga club Wolfsburg signed him for €6.7m in January 2022. A gutsy, energetic player with an abundance of technical poise, competitive spirit and self-belief.

22 Facundo BUONANOTTE
(ARGENTINA)

Left-footed winger who usually operates from the right. Made his breakthrough last year with his local club, Rosario Central, where then-coach Carlos Tevez went as far as to compare him to Lionel Messi. An injury in the opening game of the South American U20 Championship frustratingly ruled him out for the rest of the campaign – a tournament where Argentina hugely underwhelmed, failing even to qualify for the final group stage. Buonanotte's progress at Brighton – a club known for their ability to scout a gem – has been highly encouraging, and he was included in Argentina's senior squad in March. Pressure will be on him to deliver at these finals.

23 Jarell QUANSAH
(ENGLAND)

Currently on loan from parent club Liverpool at English third-tier side Bristol Rovers, Quansah is the prototype of the modern-day centre-back, combining athleticism and strength with excellent distribution and a certain elegance. He was much to the fore as England U19s romped to the European Championship title last year, imperious in defence and also finding the time for more constructive work: the winner in the semi-final against Italy and an assist in the victory over Israel in the final – displays that saw him named in the Team of the Tournament alongside fellow Englishmen Matthew Cox, Harvey Vale and Chukwuemeka. From Warrington in Cheshire, he has been in the Liverpool academy since the age of five.

24 Ali JASIM
(IRAQ)

Whatever else happens in the career of the 19-year-old, he already has a place assured in the history books of Iraqi football thanks to his exploits in March's U20 Asian Cup. In stoppage time of the quarter-final against Iran, the winger picked up the ball midway in the Iran half and set off for goal. Despite being surrounded by four defenders, his low shot was enough to win the game and secure a place at these finals. He also scored against Japan in the semi-final and then netted in the penalty shootout as the young Lions of Mesopotamia reached the final, losing narrowly to Uzbekistan.

25 Cristian VOLPATO
(ITALY)

Over the course of his stellar coaching career, Jose Mourinho has not always been a champion of youthful talent. But he is doing a fine job of mentoring Volpato at Roma, giving the attacking midfielder his first-team debut last season (aged just 18), using him in small doses in Serie A and generally attentive when monitoring the youngster's development. In his element as a playmaker or as a false nine, he was born and raised by Italian parents in New South Wales, Australia. Turned down a call-up from the Socceroos at the 2022 World Cup – his future is *Azzurri*.

26 Alvaro RODRIGUEZ
(URUGUAY)

Football in Uruguay is so often a family affair, which is certainly true in the case of this tall, left-footed centre-forward. There are plenty of footballing connections in his bloodline, most notably his father, a Uruguay international who ended up settling in Spain, where Alvaro was born. He was a little inconsistent in qualifying, but was simply devastating on his day, including a hat-trick against the Bolivians and a double against Venezuela. His stock has since risen further with appearances for Real Madrid's first team, especially after netting his first La Liga goal in the derby versus Atletico.

27 Naoki KUMATA
(JAPAN)

The 18-year-old scored five goals in Asia's U20 Championship to claim the Golden Boot and add to his burgeoning reputation in his homeland. He comes alive in the area and can finish in a variety of ways – as displayed in the qualifers in Uzbekistan. Samurai Blue legend Atsuto Uchida has labelled him an "amazing talent" and told fans of FC Tokyo, the club for which Kumata recently made his first-team debut, to get his autograph sooner rather than later. It is rare for one so young to get so much club action in Japan, but there is already talk of a move to Europe and his standing will only increase after the World Cup.

28 Joel ORDONEZ
(ECUADOR)

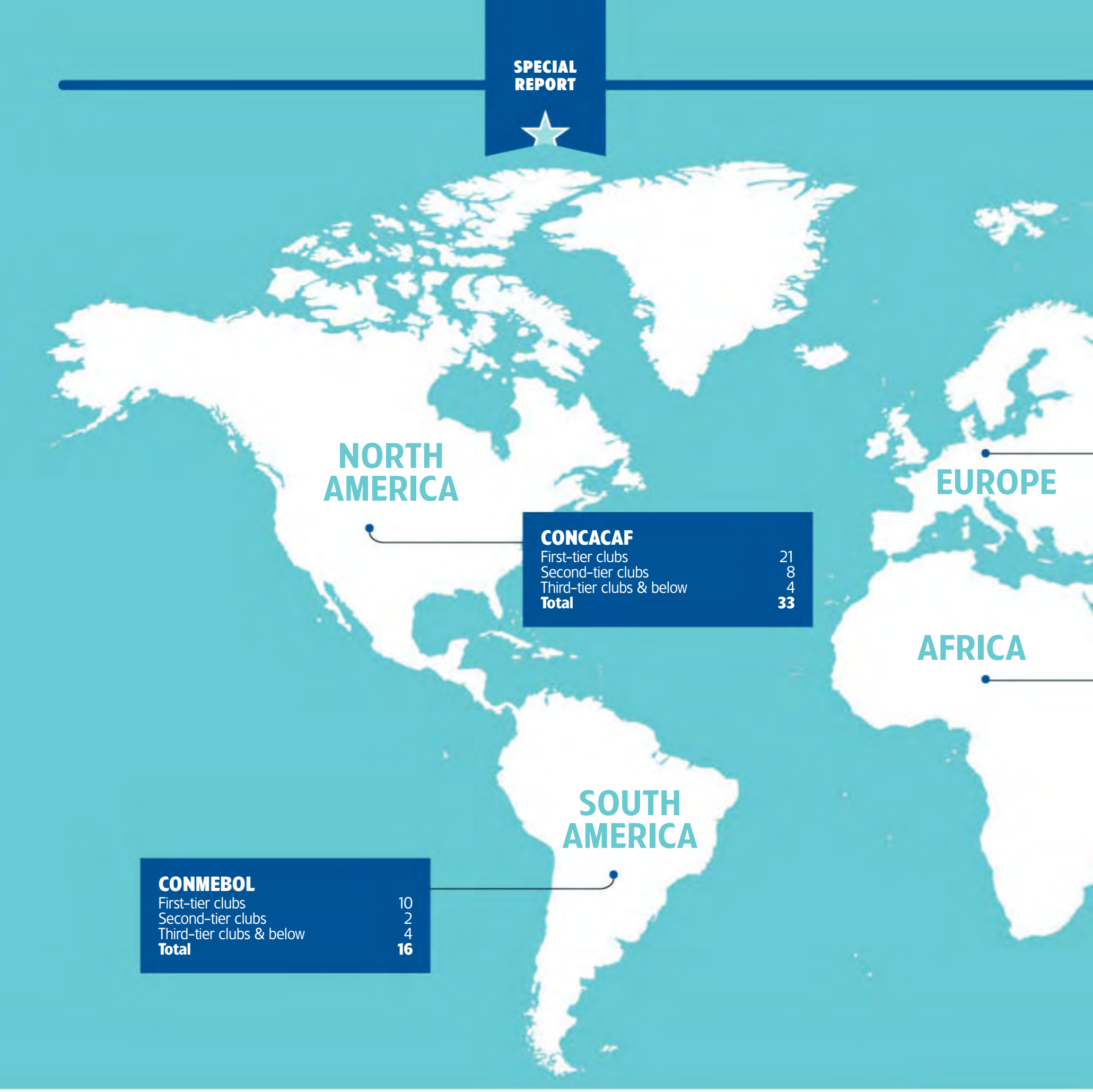
Already included in our UEFA Youth League talent scout (see page 53), Ordonez simply could not be excluded from this list either. Ecuador's remarkable Independiente del Valle have established such a reputation for excellence in their youth development that many of their burgeoning products are barely reaching the first team before they are sold abroad. Centre-back Ordonez fits this pattern. So impressive was he in last year's Copa Libertadores at the age of 18 that, after just 12 senior games, he was on his way to Belgian champions Club Brugge. Strong and classy, he was not released for the U20 South American qualifiers in January/February, but was part of the senior Ecuador squad that went to Australia in March.

29 Adama BOJANG
(GAMBIA)

Bojang made a real impact on the bevy of scouts at the U20 Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt, and if the red tops are to be believed there are several Premier League and Serie A clubs tussling for his services. From the Steve Biko club in Banjul, where he is among the Gambian league's top marksmen, Bojang netted a hat-trick in the quarter-finals and the winner when they upset highly fancied Nigeria in the semi-finals. The 18-year-old has a towering frame to go along with sensational speed and an eye for goal.

30 Aaron ZUNIGA
(HONDURAS)

If the Honduran youngsters are once again at the global top table – this will be their ninth appearance in these finals – they have their centre-back and skipper to thank. Zuniga, who was named in the 2022 CONCACAF U20 Championship Team of the Tournament, holds their back line together with his tower of power defensive qualities, composure in the heat of battle and ability as an organiser. He simply transmits a feeling of security to the entire team. Learnt his chops at arguably Honduras' best youth club, Real Waguia, before joining leading top-flight side Real Espana a couple of years ago. Linked with a move to MLS.



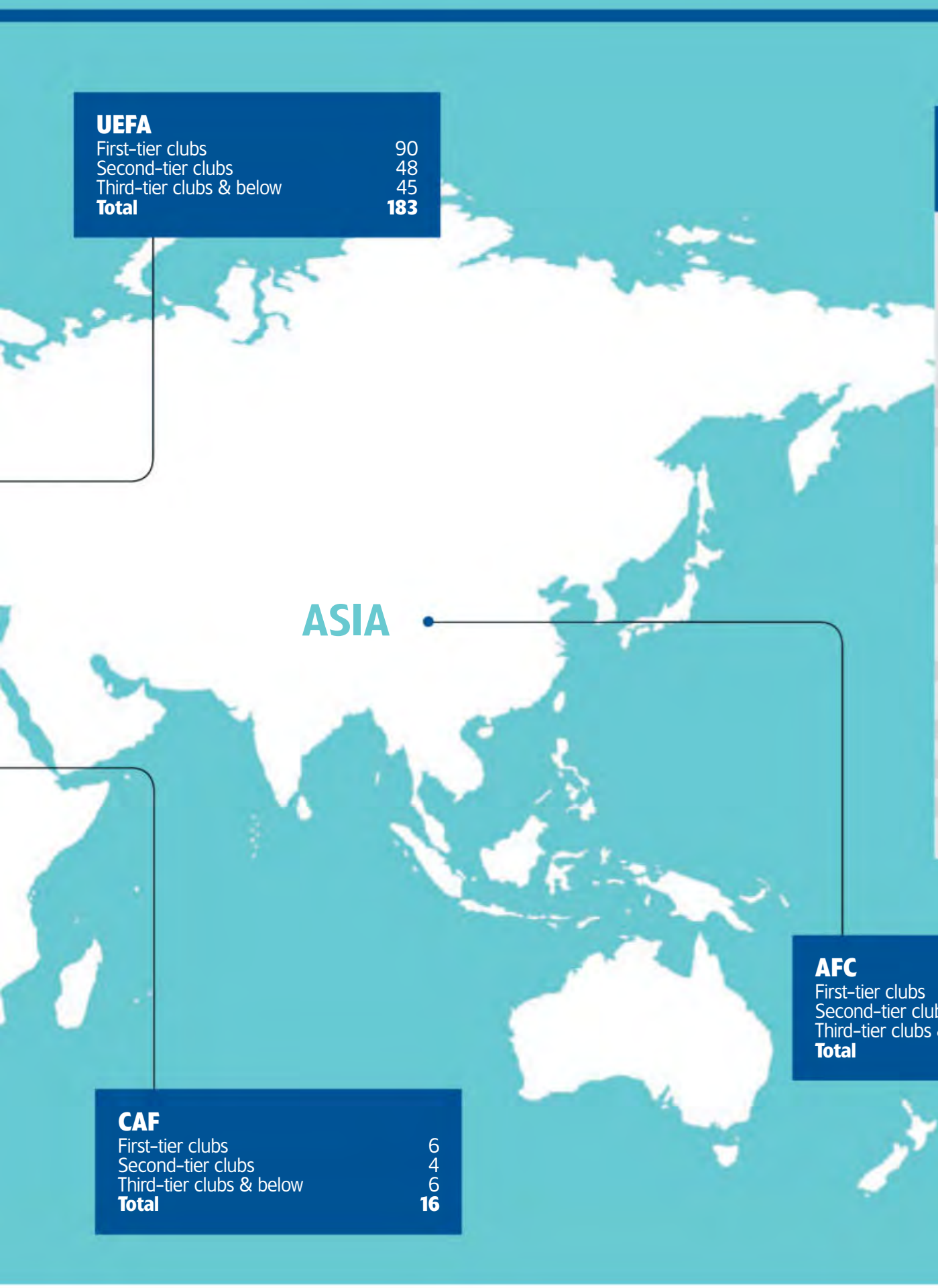
CONCACAF	
First-tier clubs	21
Second-tier clubs	8
Third-tier clubs & below	4
Total	**33**

CONMEBOL	
First-tier clubs	10
Second-tier clubs	2
Third-tier clubs & below	4
Total	**16**

MULTI-CLUB OWNERSHIP [PART TWO]

In May 2021, *World Soccer* investigated the rising trend of multi-club ownership models. Since then, a lot has changed…

Words: Steve Menary



UEFA

First-tier clubs	90
Second-tier clubs	48
Third-tier clubs & below	45
Total	**183**

AFC

First-tier clubs	12
Second-tier clubs	4
Third-tier clubs & below	4
Total	**20**

CAF

First-tier clubs	6
Second-tier clubs	4
Third-tier clubs & below	6
Total	**16**

Multi-club ownership groups

According to *World Soccer*'s research, there are now 268 clubs across the globe owned by a total of 99 different MCO groups…

WORLDWIDE

First-tier clubs	139
Second-tier clubs	66
Third-tier clubs & below	63
Total	**268**

MCO GROUPS BY SIZE

5+ clubs	9
4 clubs	12
3 clubs	14
2 clubs	64
Total	**99**

BIGGEST MCO GROUPS

City Football Group	12 clubs
Pacific Media Group	8 clubs
Bolt/Global Football Holdings (David Blitzer)	8 clubs
777 Partners	7 clubs
Grupo Pachuca	6 clubs
Red Bull	6 clubs
Andy Pilley	5 clubs
Capelli Sport	5 clubs
Prince Abdullah/United World	5 clubs

With many football clubs financially weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic, takeovers and the emergence of fresh bids for ownership are an almost weekly occurrence. And, usually, the bidders already own another club.

Polish second-tier outfit GKS Tychy were recently acquired by Pacific Media Group, which already owned seven other clubs. Fourteen-time Irish champions Dundalk attracted interest from the Turkish owners of English Championship side Hull City, and Chelsea's owners – after having a bid for Portuguese club Portimonense rejected – are now said to be courting French side Strasbourg. The new owners of Manchester United – assuming that the Glazers do indeed sell – could own or have indirect control in another club if the UK's richest man Sir Jim Ratcliffe, who has interest in both French side Nice and Swiss club Lausanne-Sport, fends off competition from rival bidder Sheikh Jassim Bin Hamad Al Thani from Qatar, while Elliott Investment Management, who sold Milan last year but retain a minority stake in the Italian champions, have also expressed interest in the Red Devils.

Multi-club ownership has accelerated phenomenally since *World Soccer* last analysed the MCO networks two years ago. The number of clubs around the world whose owners have stakes, ownership or control over other sides has subsequently more than doubled.

A surge in takeovers, particularly from US investors such as 777 Partners, whose portfolio includes Belgian club Standard Liege, Italy's Genoa and Hertha Berlin in Germany, and Amber Capital, which has interests in clubs in France, Colombia, Italy and Spain, is part of the reason for the increase.

Another is the regular discovery of connections that, while not necessarily hidden, were not obviously evident: Vartan Sirmakes, for example, the Swiss watchmaker who owns four clubs including Stade Lausanne Ouchy (as seen in the March 2023 edition of *World Soccer*).

In spring 2021, *World Soccer* identified 117 clubs around the world controlled by 45 different MCO groups. By the end of March 2023, this research found 268 different clubs engulfed in the MCO phenomenon in 60 different countries. Those clubs are controlled by 99 different groups, two thirds of which are comprised of only two clubs.

In its benchmarking report released in February, UEFA warned: "The rise of multi-club investment has the potential to pose a material threat to the integrity of European club competitions, with a growing risk of seeing two clubs with the same owner or investor facing each other on the pitch."

The rules on MCO focus on sporting integrity and were overhauled after three clubs owned by ENIC – AEK Athens, Slavia Prague and Vicenza – all qualified for the quarter-finals of the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1997-98. The Court of Arbitration for Sport and the European Union upheld these rules but another challenge emerged in 2017 when two Red Bull subsidiaries, Salzburg of Austria and German club Leipzig, qualified for the UEFA Champions League.

Article 5.01(c)(iv) stated that "no individual or legal entity" could have "decisive influence" in two or more clubs in UEFA club competitions. Red Bull subsequently made corporate changes and, although Salzburg failed to make it past the third qualifying round of the 2017-18 campaign, the two clubs did end up playing against each other in the group stage of the Europa League the season after.

Across Europe, there are 23 countries that have rules on ownership or control of more than one club and UEFA says a number of other countries are planning to introduce new rules but, outside of sporting integrity, other issues exist.

Red Bull rivals... Leipzig and Salzburg met in the Europa League in 2018

For example, one club in an MCO group could sell a player to another club with the same ownership for less than could be achieved on the going market. This sale could potentially result in the selling club making a loss and then not paying tax, as loss-making entities generally do not pay taxes. This club would then be in a stronger position than its domestic rivals, who bought players on the open market and, if profitable, paid tax.

> In spring 2021, *World Soccer* identified 117 clubs around the world controlled by 45 different MCO groups. By the end of March 2023, this research found 268 different clubs engulfed in the MCO phenomenon

As the takeover bids swirled around Manchester United, UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said a "re-think" was needed on its rules about MCO. In an interview with former United player Gary Neville on *The Overlap*, Ceferin said: "There is more and more interest for this multi-club ownership and we shouldn't just say no [to] the investments, and for multi-club ownership. But we have to see what kind of rules we set in that case, because the rules have to be strict." Concerning the current rules stopping anyone having influence over two clubs in the same UEFA competition, Ceferin added: "The options are it stays like that or we allow them to play the same competitions. I am not sure yet."

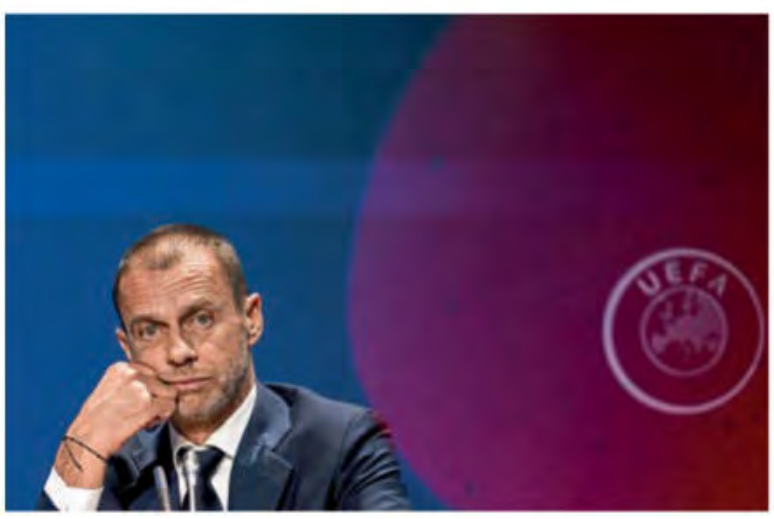
As a stepping-stone to the "Big Five" leagues of England, Spain, Germany, Italy and France, Europe proves to be the main focus of MCO. *World Soccer*'s research found clubs in 32 European countries in cross-ownership and just under half of these clubs are outside the top tier, but the trend is global.

There are clubs tied up in cross-ownership networks in four of the other five regional confederations. CONCACAF has the largest amount at 33 clubs, due to 22 teams in the United States and the expansion of Mexican investment from Grupo Pachuca and Orlegi Sports, the latter of which owns Sporting Gijon in Spain.

There are 20 clubs in Asia and 16 in both Africa and South America, where the liberalisation of ownership rules in Brazil has produced a growing number of clubs in MCO: Manchester City's owners City Football Group (CFG) swooping for Bahia and 777 Partners investing in Vasco da Gama. *World Soccer*'s research found at least 183 European clubs tied up in MCO networks and another 85 teams in the rest of the world.

In Europe, fans have routinely protested at takeovers and in some cases even repelled investors, such as NAC Breda in the Netherlands last year, where a bid by CFG failed after fan protests. The key issue for supporters is they do not want their team to become a feeder club for bigger sides.

"Clubs are part of their local communities and not suitable for this structure," says Martin Endemann, head of policy for Football Supporters Europe. "Feeder clubs make some sense but for fans it only makes sense if you are the top club in the chain."



No decision on MCO yet...UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin at the 47th Ordinary Congress in Lisbon

This was illustrated when the consortium of US investors led by Bill Foley bought Premier League side Bournemouth for £120 million in December 2022, and then a month later took a 33 per cent stake in French club Lorient, who were chasing a place in Europe. Bournemouth subsequently snapped up Lorient's Burkina Faso international Dango Ouattara and the French club's European aspirations began to falter.

Player unions are also concerned on the impact of their members caught in these networks, as the number of players tied up in these ownership networks is massive.

In its latest benchmarking report, UEFA found 180 clubs in MCO and 6,500 players tied up. *World Soccer*'s figures for clubs in MCO are far higher and, using UEFA's metric, this suggests nearly 10,000 footballers involved. Given that there will be more clubs in undiscovered MCO structures and players tied up through links with academies in other regions, this figure is almost certainly far higher.

At UEFA's Congress in Lisbon in April, Ceferin publicly addressed the issue of MCO, telling reporters: "We have not decided anything about MCO yet, it's just a discussion.

"I don't have a problem if [investors] come in the interest of profit, but they should not forget about the purpose [of a club] and the rules should be strict anyway.

"It's an issue for sure but we don't have a solution yet. It's too fast to say anything. I agree that the owner can be anyone – well, almost anyone – but the rules must be strict and we have to have in mind sustainability."

The European Club Association (ECA), which represents the continent's top sides, reportedly discussed MCO at its general assembly in Budapest earlier this year but has not commented publicly. Investors taking stakes in clubs in Europe and elsewhere do not want any regulation, and any meaningful regulation would need to extend beyond one continental federation.

Multi-club owner ...Sir Jim Ratcliffe

Fernando Roitman, founder of CIES Sport Intelligence, which also tracks MCO networks, says: "Such regulatory interventions would normally fall under the competence of FIFA, rather than UEFA. Article 25 of the UEFA Club Licensing and Financial Sustainability Regulations state that: 'The licence applicant must respect the provisions of the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players with regard to loans of professional players.'"

FIFA, which does not answer questions on the subject of MCO, did introduce rules on the number of player loans as part of an overhaul of transfer regulations in 2022, but could be forced into action over its plans for an expanded Club World Cup in 2025.

Clubs from CFG's growing network could be drawn together, while other potential qualifiers, such as Chelsea and Newcastle United, are also exploring an MCO strategy that could create a clash. For UEFA and FIFA, the issue can only be put off for so long.

Protest...NAC Breda fans derailed their club's City Football Group sale

Biggest MCO groups

Club, Country (Confederation)	Tier
CITY FOOTBALL GROUP	
Melbourne City, Australia (AFC)	1
Lommel SK, Belgium (UEFA)	2
Bahia, Brazil (CONMEBOL)	1
Sichuan Jiuniu, China (AFC)	2
Manchester City, England (UEFA)	1
Troyes, France (UEFA)	1
Mumbai City, India (AFC)	1
Palermo, Italy (UEFA)	2
Yokohama F. Marinos*, Japan (AFC)	1
Girona, Spain (UEFA)	1
Montevideo City Torque, Uruguay (CONMEBOL)	1
New York City FC, USA (CONCACAF)	1
PACIFIC MEDIA GROUP	
KV Oostende, Belgium (UEFA)	2
Esbjerg fB, Denmark (UEFA)	3
Barnsley, England (UEFA)	3
Nancy Lorraine, France (UEFA)	3
Kaiserslautern*, Germany (UEFA)	2
FC Den Bosch, Netherlands (UEFA)	2
GKS Tychy, Poland (UEFA)	2
FC Thun, Switzerland (UEFA)	2
BOLT/GLOBAL FOOTBALL HOLDINGS (DAVID BLITZER)	
Beveren, Belgium (UEFA)	2
Brondby, Denmark (UEFA)	1
Crystal Palace, England (UEFA)	1
Augsburg, Germany (UEFA)	1
ADO Den Haag, Netherlands (UEFA)	2
Estoril Praia, Portugal (UEFA)	1
Alcorcon, Spain (UEFA)	3
Real Salt Lake, USA (CONCACAF)	1
777 PARTNERS	
Melbourne Victory*, Australia (AFC)	1
Standard Liege, Belgium (UEFA)	1
Vasco da Gama, Brazil (CONMEBOL)	1
Red Star, France (UEFA)	3
Hertha Berlin, Germany (UEFA)	1
Genoa, Italy (UEFA)	2
Sevilla*, Spain (UEFA)	1
GRUPO PACHUCA	
Everton de Vina del Mar, Chile (CONMEBOL)	1
Pachuca, Mexico (CONCACAF)	1
Leon, Mexico (CONCACAF)	1
Coyotes de Tlaxcala, Mexico (CONCACAF)	2
Real Oviedo, Spain (UEFA)	2
Atletico Atenas, Uruguay (CONMEBOL)	2
RED BULL	
Red Bull Salzburg, Austria (UEFA)	1
FC Liefering, Austria (UEFA)	2
Red Bull Bragantino, Brazil (CONMEBOL)	1
Red Bull Brasil, Brazil (CONMEBOL)	3
RB Leipzig, Germany (UEFA)	1
New York Red Bulls, USA (CONCACAF)	1
ANDY PILLEY	
Fleetwood Town, England (UEFA)	3
Waterford, Republic of Ireland (UEFA)	2
Hout Bay United, South Africa (CAF)	3
Western Cape Fleetwood, South Africa (CAF)	4
Fleetwood United, United Arab Emirates (AFC)	3
CAPELLI SPORT	
HB Koge, Denmark (UEFA)	2
MSV Duisburg*, Germany (UEFA)	3
Inter Allies, Ghana (CAF)	1
FK Utenis Utena, Lithuania (UEFA)	3
CSA Rush, USA (CONCACAF)	3
PRINCE ABDULLAH/UNITED WORLD GROUP	
Beerschot, Belgium (UEFA)	2
Sheffield United, England (UEFA)	2
Chateauroux, France (UEFA)	3
Kerala United, India (AFC)	1
Al Hilal United, United Arab Emirates (AFC)	3

*Majority stake where known. *Denotes minority stake.*

RAOUL SAVOY

"It's a big chance for us to qualify for the first time and write some history"

The Swiss-born coach has taken the Central African Republic to the brink of their first-ever Africa Cup of Nations finals

In June you have the chance to seal qualification when you take on Angola in your penultimate AFCON 2023 qualifier. Can you do it?
It won't be easy because we play Angola, who must win the game if they are to have any chance, and they are a good team. They have more experience than us because our team is very young. But Angola are under pressure because they know if they draw or lose, it will be tough for them. They have to fight to win this game. And for us, we are going to do all we can to qualify. It's a big chance for us to qualify for the first time and write some history.

You have to play the match in Douala, Cameroon because the Central African Republic does not have a suitable stadium. How much of a setback is this for you?
It's not easy but this country has not been able to host any international games for the last ten years. First there was the war here and then after that the failure of the stadia to pass inspection by the Confederation of African Football. So, it's not like we are not used to it, it has been the reality for the team for some time now. We have no option; we are obligated to play away. But for us it's painful, of course, because we want to play in front of our fans. And Bangui is a difficult place for visiting teams to come and play and that would be a major advantage for us. Not many teams came away with points from here. But there's no time to cry about that. We know the problem. We just have to persevere. Can you imagine we qualify for the AFCON having played six games away? It would be a great point to our story.

How did you persuade your star player, Atletico Madrid midfielder Geoffrey Kondogbia, back to the team?
That is not the point because, for me, it's always about the squad – I speak always about the team first. But we were always in contact. His absence was just a story of life, nothing sensational. He called me to say: "I'm available." And I said: "OK, that's nice." That was it. It was only two sentences. Nothing more.

But having him back proved pivotal in March when you beat Madagascar home and away. He's a great player and it must have been a major boost?
Yeah, when you have a good player like that in the team, then the other ones become better as well. And the confidence boost...that goes without saying.

Given all the travails in the Central African Republic, it would seem to be a very tough job to take on. Have there been a lot of obstacles you have had to overcome?
No, not so much because the FA president is somebody who looks very far into the future. And we're working on three pillars. First of all, we have to develop the young ones. And then we have to work with local players, that they become better and can compete at a higher level, particularly physically and technically. And then we talk about the players overseas. Those are the three pillars – we have to work on the young ones, the local players and overseas-based players. We have a team now that is very balanced.

Do you look for players in Europe, particularly France, with connections to the Central African Republic that you can persuade to come and play?
We have a lot, not only in France but elsewhere in Europe and across the world. We talk with them, but I'm not pushing them to come. For me, it's important when you talk with players for the first time, you have to be very open about all that playing for the national team entails. If he is not ready to come, then I don't push it. I don't want players to come only because they have been cajoled. If they accept to play for the Central African Republic, it's because they are fully committed to this project. That's why if I speak to a player who might be eligible to play for us, but he is not keen, I just say: "OK, you know where we are and if one day you are open, just call us."

Will the Central African Republic be able to sustain success if you manage to qualify for the first time?
We are working towards this. As I said, we work with the youth teams so that talent keeps coming through over the next couple of years. We have some good players in the national team. I think the most difficult thing is to qualify for the first time. Once we qualify once, if you continue to work hard, qualifying again and again for the AFCON will become easier. We've seen that with other countries. We know it's tough to qualify for the first time and then after that doors are open.

The Central African Republic is the only country in Africa where football is not the most popular sport. Basketball is, and they have had a lot of past success. Does this leave soccer a second-class citizen?
Not at all. Look, it's easier to be one of the best teams in Africa in basketball than in football. But we coexist side by side without any problems. We have sufficient talent for both sports.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

AVRAM GRANT

"Here, you see talent everywhere"

The former Chelsea, West Ham United, Portsmouth and Ghana manager speaks to *World Soccer* to discuss his new role in charge of the Zambia national team

You began life in Zambia with two victories against Lesotho in the AFCON 2023 qualifiers. How pleased were you with that start?
I had watched many of the games that the Zambia national team had played before, so I knew the weaknesses and strengths. But I had a very short time to prepare them. I had monitored players in Europe and in the league here, in which time I saw a lot of games. And then I needed to make the selection. We had some targets about how to improve our game but a very short time to do so. That is actually something that Africa needs to think about. They lose days at the start of the international break while the majority of the players are travelling from Europe, so there is even less time to work with the players. But I think the players picked up the information very well.

Lesotho were very difficult to play against, they had already drawn 0-0 with the Ivory Coast in which they gave them no chances. One of the things that we spoke about was mentality, and I thought we showed a very good mentality because we were 1-0 down in the first game but responded very well and won the game. Of course, there were a lot of things that we can improve on, and we will improve them. The other thing that I was very happy about was how we played in the second half of the second game. The players were supposed to be tired. I said to them: "Tired is not just physical but a mental attitude," and we were looking really fresh.

Do you think that your next qualifier against Ivory Coast in June is going to teach you a lot more about your team?
Today, when you are coaching in the top leagues, every game is different. If you are Chelsea, playing against Wigan is not the same as playing against Manchester United. It is the same with national teams. Ivory Coast are a very good team with very good players. I don't have good memories with them, because with Ghana we got to the final [of AFCON 2015] against them and lost after 22 penalties, despite playing very well and restricting a strong team with Yaya Toure and other top players to very few chances.

They still have a good team, a very good team, so it will be a difficult game. But it's a challenge. And I like these challenges. This is why we're playing football, to have a different challenge all the time.

What do you think the potential of this Zambian side is? You've got a lot of exciting players like Patson Daka and Fashion Sakala. Do you feel this is a squad with some real potential?
I wouldn't have come here if there was no potential. Over the last ten years what I've been looking for are challenges – in Serbia, in India, with the Ghana national team. I took over Ghana after the crisis at the World Cup in Brazil and just a month or so before the Cup of Nations finals. I saw it as a big, big challenge because nobody in the country at the same time believed in the team or its quality, but we got to the final. So there is a big challenge here in Zambia, a challenge to improve the players, to improve the team and also off the pitch. But I can tell you that in Zambia there's a lot of passion for the game, and it's a delight for me to take the team forward.

Having worked in Africa before as the coach of Ghana, does that make this assignment a little bit easier, the fact that you know what to expect?
No doubt it's helped me. But even when I went to Ghana I knew the mentality of Africa – it's not like I was understanding it for first time. So the experience that I had with Ghana and at the Cup of Nations helped me a lot. Ghana was obviously a big challenge, Africa is a big challenge, but I love Africa because I think there is a lot of potential here. But every lecture that I have delivered when I was consulting across the world starts with one quote: "Nobody has enough talent to live on the talent alone." So if Africa can do the right things off the pitch, the sky's the limit. Or as one of my friends told me: "Even the sky is not the limit". Here, you see talent everywhere. And they're very nice people in Africa, really nice and positive. I enjoy their company. But you need to ensure that professionalism is in place and pay much more attention to this. To improve talent, you need to give them the tools.

How much importance do you place on having as many players based in Europe as you can in your squad? Is there a route into your team for a player from the Zambian league?
First, it's not a secret that in Europe there is better football than in Africa. But having said that, the league here in Zambia is very exciting – people are passionate about it. But you have different levels. For example, the quality of pitches in the fourth division in the Netherlands is better than in Africa. Education of coaches is another factor; coaches are very keen to learn but there are not many opportunities to do so. Backroom staff, the medical department, individual training, all of this is lacking. Even in Europe, I think they can be even better, but it's better than Africa for sure. I enjoyed watching the league in Africa, especially the passion, but we all know the best players are in Europe. We need now to bring Europe to Africa, to force a situation where there are pitches, good staff and also education. And I can tell you a secret: we are planning to do just this in Zambia together with the president of the football association. Even at my age, I'm always looking for the possibility to be better.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

THE BEST
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Glenn Moore

Reality check for England

Finalissima trophy fails to mask concerns for the European champions ahead of the World Cup, while their captain suffers a cruel blow

Winners...England players celebrate after beating Brazil on penalties in the Finalissima

As a new event, the Women's Finalissima will take time to establish itself. But the inaugural version, like the rebranded men's edition in 2022, benefited from a spectacular start.

Last June, Lionel Messi inspired Copa America champions Argentina to a 3-0 victory over European titleholders Italy in front of 87,112 at Wembley. This year England levelled the score for Europe, the Euro 2022 winners beating Copa America Femenina champions Brazil on penalties. Wembley was again the stage with 83,132 braving a chilly night.

Argentina's men, of course, went on to lift the World Cup, a feat England hope to emulate this summer. However, in a proverbial match of two halves questions were raised against this aspiration. Those doubts deepened a few days later when England suffered their first defeat in 31 matches under Sarina Wiegman, to co-hosts Australia, and suffered a grievous blow later in April when captain Leah Williamson ruptured her ACL playing for Arsenal.

At Wembley, with Brazil struggling with an unfamiliar back-three set-up, England dominated the first period, enjoying three-quarters of possession, having nine shots to one, and scoring through Ella Toone after a sublime five-pass move from back to front.

However, after two disappointing World Cups the Brazilian FA finally realised they cannot rely on the natural talent of players like Marta and Debinha alone, and hired Pia Sundhage. The Swede, who won two Olympic gold medals with USA and silver with her native country, knows what she's doing.

A half-time tactical shift transformed the match and England, who like most major European nations cruise through many matches, suddenly had questions asked of them. This is what Wiegman had wanted, though she would not have welcomed the inability to answer them.

While the Lionesses still shaded possession they were no longer a threat and the second-half shot count was 8-2 in favour of Brazil. Yet with Mary Earps seemingly up to the challenge of anything that was thrown at her, notably tipping a shot from Geyse onto the bar, England looked set for victory, until the 92nd minute when the usually secure Manchester United goalkeeper spilled a cross, allowing Roma's Andressa Alves to smash in the loose ball.

The match went straight to penalties. Toone missed, but Earps saved from Tamires and saw Rafaelle Souza hit the bar. That gave Chloe Kelly, who had hit the winner at the same venue in the final of Euro 2022, the chance to be the matchwinner again. She took it.

> England suffered their first defeat in 31 matches under Sarina Wiegman, to co-hosts Australia, and suffered a grievous blow later in April when captain Leah Williamson ruptured her ACL playing for Arsenal

With a World Cup looming, winning a penalty shootout under pressure was one of the positives for England. Their only previous spot-kick finales at major tournaments had ended in failure (the 2011 World Cup quarter-final against France, when then-manager Hope Powell branded senior players "cowards" for not volunteering to take one, and the 1984 Euros final when Sundhage had scored the winning kick for Sweden).

Williamson ruled out...the curse of the ACL strikes again

Another plus as the team evolves from the 2022 Euros is Lauren James' emergence as a player of real quality in tight areas, while Georgia Stanway (Bayern Munich) and Keira Walsh (Barcelona) are both growing from playing overseas.

However, England struggled to play out when Brazil pressed high, and also found it hard to penetrate when Brazil went to two banks of four.

The latter problem surfaced again five days later against an Australian team that had been surprisingly beaten 1-0 by Scotland a few days prior. Well-organised, and bolstered by the return of Sam Kerr, Australia kept the Lionesses at bay with relative ease and scored through Kerr and Charlotte Grant. The first goal was marginally offside and the second aided by a big deflection off England skipper Williamson, but victory was deserved.

The same night Brazil took further encouragement from a 2-1 victory in Germany, spoiling Dzsenifer Marozsan's retirement match in front of 32,587 at Nuremburg.

Given Brazil were without both Marta and Debinha for both matches, it appears Sundhage has swiftly overseen a revival and renewal with Geyse (another player improving by playing at Barcelona) leading a crop of youngish players that also includes Kerolin (North Carolina Courage), Ary Borges (Racing Louisville) and Lauren (Madrid CFF).

Elsewhere during the international break the major news was in France where Herve Renard found himself 2-0 down 50 minutes into his debut as successor to Corinne Diacre.

The appointment of Renard, who oversaw Saudi Arabia's stunning men's World Cup defeat of Argentina, was a coup for the French federation but this wasn't in the script. However, half-time substitute Delphine Cascarino and the

recalled Eugenie Le Sommer (one of several players estranged under Diacre) scored twice as France ran out 5-2 winners. *Les Bleues* then followed that up with a 2-1 victory over an injury-hit Canadian side.

Across the Atlantic there was good and bad new for United States coach Vlatko Andonovski. Julie Ertz, a two-time World Cup winner, played her first international since giving birth to her first child in August 2022. Andonovski has struggled to fill Ertz's holding midfield role and, having signed for Angel City, she has a real chance of gate-crashing the World Cup squad.

However, in the same 2-0 defeat of Republic of Ireland in Austin, Texas, Mallory Swanson suffered a serious knee injury that required surgery. Andonovski admitted her likely World Cup absence will mean reshaping his attack.

Strong start... new France boss Herve Renard

Among the other contenders, Sweden lost 1-0 to Denmark and were held 3-3 by Norway, both at home. That draw provided relief for a Norwegian side beaten 4-2 by a Spanish team still without a raft of exiled key players. The Danes followed up with a 1-0 defeat of Japan, while the Netherlands rallied from home defeat to Germany with a 4-1 victory over Poland.

These vicissitudes of form underline how hard it is to make sense of an international break that came as the club season approached a climax and in which World Cup coaches, with 100 days to go, were fine tuning.

England at least ended it with some silverware, but the reality check Australia provided, coupled with Williamson's cruel, untimely injury, has curbed expectation of a greater triumph to come. With Swanson's injury undermining the other favourites, the World Cup looks increasingly wide open.

Round-up

Platform...the 2022 Euros saw record-breaking attendances

SWISS TO STAGE 2025 EUROS

Switzerland held off three rival bids to win hosting rights for the 2025 Euros. It will be the Alpine nation's first sole hosting of a major football tournament since the 1954 men's World Cup, though they did co-host the men's 2008 Euros with Austria.

France were knocked out first, attracting only one vote. Poland went next before the Swiss saw off a joint-Nordic bid featuring Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway.

There was some concern that, given the rate of growth of the women's game, UEFA have set the bar too low with none of the proposed stadia reaching 40,000 capacity and only three above 30,000 (Basel, Berne, Geneva).

Last year's record-breaking Euros in England drew 68,871 to Old Trafford for the opener, 87,192 to Wembley for the final, and more than half a million spectators in total. However, the next highest gate was 30,785 for England v Northern Ireland at Southampton and the average was 18,544.

FOUR BIDS TO STAGE 2027 WC

Expressions of interest in hosting the 2027 World Cup were made by seven countries involving four bids by the April 21 deadline. Brazil and South Africa launched single-nation bids. Joint-bids were received from a Netherlands-Belgium-Germany combination and a US-Mexico partnership.

The tournament, first held back in 1991, has never been staged in Africa or South America. Bids must be confirmed by May 19. The hosting decision is due to be made May 17, 2024.

Hanging up her gloves... Carly Telford

THIRD CALIFORNIAN TEAM SET TO JOIN THE NWSL

The United States women's league is to expand to the San Francisco Bay area in 2024, taking the NWSL to 14 clubs. After a decade without a Californian club it will be the state's third franchise following San Diego Wave and Los Angeles-based Angel City, which both joined in 2022 and were immediate successes. The successful consortium, who are expected to play in San Jose initially, are reported to have paid a $53 million entry fee.

Californian clubs...San Diego Wave and Angel City

BELARUS STRIPPED OF EURO UNDER-19 FINALS

UEFA are looking for new hosts for the 2025 Under-19 European Championship after removing them from Belarus. With the country banned from hosting internationals on home soil due to their support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine the decision was inevitable.

INS & OUTS

Melissa Phillips became Brighton's third coach of the season. Elsewhere, ex-England striker Jodie Taylor rejoined Arsenal from San Diego Wave, and former Chelsea and Lionesses goalkeeper Carly Telford retired.

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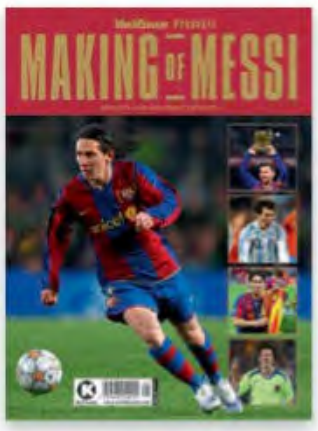

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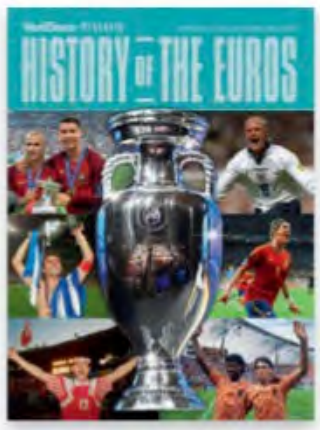

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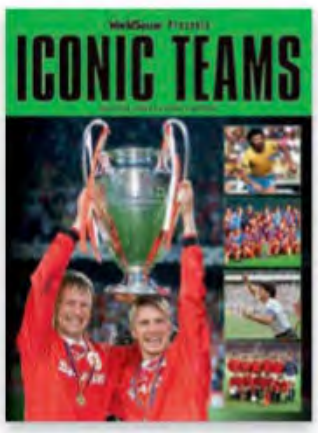

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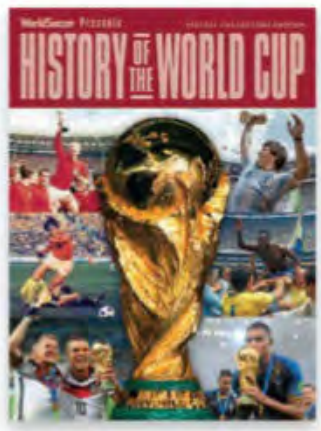

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OFC Champions League

STEVE MENARY

Auckland City eyeing 11th title

The ten-time champions of Oceania's premier club competition will be the team to beat at this year's tournament in Vanuatu

Holders Auckland City are favourites to retain their OFC Champions League crown, but moving the finals from New Zealand to Vanuatu should create a more interesting tournament.

The competition was first staged back in 1987 as the Oceania Club Championship, with four more editions taking place from 1999 to 2006 when Australia left the OFC. A year later the tournament changed name to the Champions League.

Auckland City won their first title in 2006 and have gone on to dominate the competition with a total of ten victories, accounting for all but three of New Zealand's total titles. Only Papua New Guinea's Hekari United in 2010 and New Caledonia's Hienghene Sport in 2019 have broken the run of Kiwi dominance.

This year's hosts have produced three finalists in the past: Tafea, edged out 1-0 by Australia's Wollongong Wolves in 2001,

Veteran forward...Auckland City's experienced star Emiliano Tade

and Amicale, who were beaten by Auckland City in 2011 and again three years later.

Back then, the title was decided over two legs home and away, but this year's finals will all be played in Vanuatu with two groups of four and winners and runners-up progressing to the semi-finals.

Auckland City are semi-professional but have a number of full All Whites internationals, including defenders Cameron Howieson and Sam Brotherton and striker Ryan de Vries. In his eighth Champions League appearance, Auckland's veteran Argentine forward Emiliano Tade will know that, at 35, there might not be many more. Tade was on form in the qualifiers, scoring a hat-trick in a 5-3 win over Wellington Olympic in the national play-offs, which saw two teams from seven OFC members go head-to-head for a single place in the finals.

Fiji's Suva and the Solomon Warriors from the Solomon Islands both emerged successfully and, having recruited players from other Pacific Islands, will offer some challenge but not enough to impede Auckland City in Group A, which also includes Lupe Ole Soaga. The Samoans emerged from a preliminary qualifying group staged on their own island in February.

The final Group A game between Suva and the Warriors at the Luganville Soccer Stadium on May 20 should decide the runners-up behind Auckland City.

Group B is much more evenly matched and any of the four sides could take the top two places. Vanuatu's representatives, Ifira Black Bird, are one of the island's oldest clubs and were formed in 1918, but are making their Champions League debut with a squad full of amateurs. The players will have internationals in their squad, such as midfielder Shene Welepane.

Vanuatuan champions Ifira Black Bird thumped local rivals Sia-Raga 4-0 on aggregate in the qualifiers and will likely need at least one point from their first two games against Hekari on May 15 and AS Pirae three days later.

Pirae, Tahiti's representatives, were finalists in 2006 and also played at the 2021 Club World Cup – albeit briefly, losing 4-1 in the first round to Al Jazira of the United Arab Emirates – but looked strong in the qualifiers with international striker Tamatoa Tetauira netting a hat-trick in a 7-3 win over AS Dragon.

Ifira Black Bird have nine members of the Vanuatu national team in their squad and will rely on attacking duo Jonathan Spokeyjack and Jordy Tasip, with John Wohale pulling the strings in midfield. Their final game against Tiga Sport is potentially their hardest and at least taking participation to the final game would give the competition some impetus. Early elimination could lead to the sort of desultory attendances that have plagued the tournament over the years.

Despite playing at home at the Ngahue Reserve, only 400 people saw Auckland City beat Tahiti's AS Venus 3-0 last year and attendances at plenty of other finals have only just scraped into four figures.

Cameron Howieson will be expected to lift the trophy again for Auckland City, which would be worth ND$75,000 in prize money and a likely place at FIFA's revamped Club World Cup in 2025.

The losing finalists will get $50,000 with $25,000 for the teams finishing third and fourth, and there is help with travel expenses from the OFC, which will hope the tournament's structure and location in Vanuatu produces a more exciting path.

Auckland City are semi-professional but have a number of full All Whites internationals, including defenders Cameron Howieson and Sam Brotherton and striker Ryan de Vries

Top prize...the OFC Champions League trophy

Dominant... Auckland City lift the 2022 trophy
Credit: Instagram @officialaucklandcityfc

THE DRAW

GROUP A

- Auckland City
- Suva
- Solomon Warriors
- Lupe Ole Soaga

GROUP B

- AS Pirae
- Hekari United
- Ifira Black Bird
- Tiga Sport

CONCACAF

STEVE MENARY

CONCACAF Nations League finalists decided

United States, Mexico, Canada and Panama all book their places in the finals of the 2022-23 Nations League, as CONCACAF announces a major shake-up of the competition format for the next edition

Panama hero... Jose Fajardo's winner v Costa Rica sealed his country's place at the Nations League finals

Panama and Canada will make their debuts in the finals of the CONCACAF Nations League in June after impressively topping their respective groups in League A.

A 1-0 win away to 2021 semi-finalists Costa Rica, courtesy of a goal from Jose Fajardo, helped Thomas Christiansen's Panama qualify with three wins out of four in Group B.

Group C also went to the final game but Canada were more decisive in dismissing their closest challengers Honduras, with a brace from Real Valladolid's Cyle Larin securing a 4-1 win and denying the Central Americans a second successive finals appearance.

Panama and Canada will face each other in the semi-finals on June 15 at the Allegiant Stadium in Paradise, Nevada, which also hosted the 2021 CONCACAF Gold Cup final. The sponsor, unsurprisingly, given the game's almost ubiquitous relationship with the region, will be Qatar Airways.

The other semi-final is a re-match of the 2021 Nations League final between holders United States and Mexico, providing the intriguing possibility of an all-North American final between two of the 2026 World Cup hosts, which FIFA would certainly relish.

In the lower tiers of the Nations League, Cuba and Haiti will return

to the top tier in the next edition after winning their League B groups during the final two rounds of matches.

The Cubans won Group A with 1-0 victories in their final two games – away to Barbados and at home to Guadeloupe. Like Cuba, Haiti also won five out of six qualifiers and were guaranteed promotion before the final matchday of Group B. Instead, the vital game in the group was between Guyana and Bermuda for second spot and a place in the 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup preliminaries.

Bermuda were awarded a contentious 3-0 walkover after Montserrat failed to show up for an earlier qualifier. Had that result proved pivotal, CONCACAF could have faced an appeal from Guyana but defenders Liam Gordon and Jeremy Garrett settled matters on the pitch for Jamaal Shabazz's side with a 2-0 win in Bermuda, before drawing their final game 0-0 with Montserrat.

Nicaragua will go straight to the 2023 Gold Cup finals after holding on for a 1-1 draw away to closest challengers Trinidad & Tobago to clinch top spot in Group C by a point. Striker Ariagner Smith, who plays in Lithuania for Panevezys, put Nicaragua ahead on 27 minutes and although Joevin Jones equalised before half-time, Marco Antonio Figueroa's side held on for a vital point.

Group D also went down to the final game and French Guiana, leading the table by a point ahead of Guatemala before their final head-to-head, were in with a real chance of a surprise after holding the Central American outfit 0-0 away at half-time. But they collapsed in the second half and conceded four goals after the break to fall away.

Like the other five CONCACAF members who are not yet in FIFA, French Guiana cannot use the global body's rules to force clubs to release players, which can hinder performance. All three non-FIFA members in Leagues A and B – Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana – either finished bottom of their group or failed to win promotion. However, Martinique, the only non-FIFA member in League A, will retain their place in the top tier in 2023-24 after CONCACAF announced a significant format change to the competition.

League A will be expanded to 16 teams instead of 12 in the 2023-24 edition – with Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Guatemala joining the top tier – while the competition will also act as qualification for the 2024 CONMEBOL Copa America. The re-format means relegation was completely removed from this edition with only promotion being retained, meaning League B will continue with 16 teams in 2023-24 and League C reducing from 13 teams to nine.

USA hot-shot... Ricardo Pepi (No.9) scored three goals in the final two matches to set up a clash against Mexico

The team that really caught the eye in League C this time around was Sint Maarten – another non-FIFA member – who produced an incredible turnaround to win promotion to League B. Five points behind leaders Bonaire with two games to go, Sint Maarten thrashed their fellow Dutch territory 6-1 in matchday five with Gerwin "Smally" Lake netting a hat-trick.

Lake netted again in the final game away to the US Virgin Islands in a 2-1 win to clinch top spot in Group A and finish as top scorer across the entire qualifiers with eight goals. Like the bulk of the Sint Maarten squad, Lake was recruited from the Netherlands, where he plays for SV Poortugaal in the semi-professional Hoofdklasse.

In addition to promotion to league B, Sint Maarten will now join Stern John's Saint Lucia, St Kitts & Nevis and Puerto Rico – who all cruised through their League C groups – in the preliminary round of the 2023 Gold Cup.

The Nations League has been a major success in getting CONCACAF's members playing regularly and rewarding success

The prelims will also include all four bottom-placed teams in League A – Suriname, Martinique, Curacao and Grenada – who disappointingly managed just one victory between them across 12 games. With the four runners-up in League B – Guadeloupe, Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago and French Guiana – in the mix too, the preliminaries are likely to be extremely competitive.

Gold Cup...the Nations League also acted as qualifying for CONCACAF's top tournament, with 12 countries sealing their berths

The action will take place between June 16-20 with six knockout matches in the first round. The triumphant teams will then play off for the remaining three places at the 16-team Gold Cup finals, which will kick-off on June 24 and be hosted by the United States.

The Nations League has been a major success in getting CONCACAF's members playing regularly – whilst also rewarding success with all four League B winners qualifying directly for the Gold Cup finals – and the hope is that the re-format for 2023-24 will continue to help the region's teams grow.

The nine members eliminated from the Gold Cup preliminary stage may however look on with some envy at Qatar, who produced such a dire performance in front of their own fans at last year's World Cup but go straight into the finals as an invited guest.

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Aiming for Abidjan

Six teams book their places at next year's Africa Cup of Nations finals in Ivory Coast, but some giants stumble

Upset...Namibia striker Peter Shalulile celebrates scoring against Cameroon in Yaounde

Morocco did not even need to kick a ball to become the first team to join hosts Ivory Coast in the field for next year's Africa Cup of Nations finals, followed quickly by neighbours Algeria, then Burkina Faso, South Africa, Tunisia and defending champions Senegal.

Perennial contenders Egypt, Mali, Guinea and Ghana sit on the brink of qualification while 2012 champions Zambia are set to return to the finals after missing out on the past three editions. But there were major scares for giants Cameroon and Nigeria, who will have to wait until the penultimate round of matches in June to secure their places at the 24-team finals.

Nigeria, a side brimming with exciting young attacking talent, were handed a 1-0 defeat at home to tiny Guinea-Bissau in a shock loss that led coach Jose Peseiro to admit he expected to be fired. Mama Balde, who has been in fine goalscoring form for Troyes in France, netted in Abuja for a famous win for the former Portuguese colony, who have punched well above their weight in recent years.

But Nigeria bounced back to win in Bissau four days later, triumphing 1-0 through a Moses Simon penalty that took them back to the top of Group A.

Cameroon's last game before taking on Namibia home and away was their win over Brazil at the World Cup, but the Indomitable Lions picked up a single point out of a possible six against a team ranked 80 places below them. Peter Shalulile, whose goals have been the catalyst in Mamelodi Sundowns' march in the African Champions League, captained Namibia and scored first away in Yaounde, putting Cameroon on the back foot. Former France youth international Olivier Kemen netted a debut equaliser but the 1-1 draw was an embarrassment for the Indomitable Lions.

The return match was hosted in Soweto, South Africa, because Namibia's own stadia had been declared unfit for international competition. But despite playing in front of just a few hundred spectators they were well up for the fight against Cameroon, going 2-0 up in the second half – Shalulile scoring yet again – and then anxiously holding on after allowing Vincent Aboubakar to pull one back on the stroke of full-time.

Morocco were supposed to play Zimbabwe in Group K but they were kicked out of the tournament after being banned by FIFA, leaving the north Africans free to stage a successful homecoming, after their World Cup heroics, by beating Brazil.

With South Africa and Liberia drawing 2-2 in Johannesburg, the Moroccans were guaranteed a top-two place in the three-team group. They were joined in the finals by the fortunate South Africans, who held on grimly to snatch a 2-1 away win over Liberia in Monrovia and win their place.

Algeria and Senegal secured their spots as they won for a fourth time in their respective groups for a 100 per cent return. Algeria needed a last-gasp strike from Riyad Mahrez to turn around a deficit at home against Niger and win 2-1, then went away and beat the same side 1-0 four days later thanks to a solitary goal by Baghdad Bounedjah.

> **There were major scares for giants Cameroon and Nigeria, who will have to wait until the penultimate round of matches in June to secure their places at the 24-team finals**

Having missed the World Cup through injury, Sadio Mane returned to Senegal's line-up with a goal in a 5-1 thrashing of Mozambique at home, and they won again in Maputo four days later, this time with centre-forward Boulaye Dia scoring the game's only goal.

Tunisia will extend their record for successive AFCON finals appearances to 16. They beat neighbours Libya 3-0 at home and 1-0 away with Haythem Jouini scoring in both games. Ten points in Group J means they are

AFCON qualifiers ...action from the clash between South Africa and Liberia in Johannesburg

guaranteed a top-two finish.

Burkina Faso, who finished fourth at the last AFCON finals in Cameroon, are also through after edging out Togo 1-0 in neutral Marrakesh, with a late goal from 21-year-old forward Abdoul Tapsoba, and then holding Togo 1-1 away in the return game in Lome.

The Burkinabe were among 11 countries still forced to host their matches on neutral territory after being banned from using their own facilities because they were not up to international standard.

One of them was the Central African Republic who, despite the ban on their Bangui stadium, can secure qualification in June if they beat Angola.

Returning hero ...Sadio Mane

They recorded a rare away win in March as they thrashed Madagascar 3-0 in Antananarivo with French-based striker Louis Mafouta, recalled after two years, scoring twice. The game was also the first back for captain Geoffrey Kondogbia, with the Atletico Madrid midfielder playing his first international match since 2021.

Mafouta then scored another two goals as the Central African Republic hosted the Malagasy in neutral Douala in Cameroon, and won 2-0 to move second behind Ghana in their group and two points above Angola ahead of their crucial showdown in June.

Of the 54 members of the Confederation of African Football, only ten are yet to play at the finals but that could be down to nine next year as the Central African Republic make their breakthrough.

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

Shocks in state championships

Unfamiliar faces impress in many of Brazil's regional competitions this year

Brazil's state championships – one for each of the 27 states that make up the giant country – are a controversial part of the footballing calendar. Many see them as hopelessly out-dated, cluttering up the fixture list with a procession of largely meaningless matches between clubs who do not belong in the same category. Played in the first few months of the year, whatever the limitations of the preamble they do typically come to a gripping conclusion between well-matched historical rivals.

This year, though, in the heartlands at least, a sequence of surprises meant that there were few big clashes in the two-legged finals.

The obvious exception is Rio de Janeiro, where for the fourth consecutive year Flamengo and Fluminense duelled for the title, and for the second season in a row Fluminense came out on top. But there was something different about 2023. With former Real Madrid left-back Marcelo making a triumphant return to his roots, Fluminense staged a stunning second-leg comeback to blow Flamengo away and win 4-3 on aggregate.

The consequences were immediate. Five days before their first game of the national championship, and less than four months after hiring him, Flamengo sacked Portuguese coach Vitor Pereira, the end of a brief and unhappy spell in which he failed to balance out the side and fell short in both domestic and continental Super Cups and the big one, the Club World Cup.

Shock finalists... players of Agua Santa pose after losing in the Sao Paulo state final

For the rival coach, Fernando Diniz, this is a moment of great importance. He has been a great hope for a decade, and finally his beautifully anarchic brand of football seems to be coming good. This was his first coaching title, adding credibility to the campaign to put him in charge of the national team.

There was a second consecutive title for Palmeiras in Sao Paulo, by far the strongest of the state competitions. But Abel Ferreira's men did not have to overcome a traditional rival. The other big teams all fell by the wayside, and little Agua Santa fought their way to the final, where they caused a shock by winning the first leg 2-1 with a goal in the 92nd minute. The return match was barely a contest though, and Palmeiras won 5-2 on aggregate. Astonishingly, this was the last game of 2023 for Agua Santa, who don't compete in the national leagues, and almost all of their players had already agreed terms with other clubs. Young coach Thiago Carpini made a name for himself, and Agua Santa plan to send him to Europe to study before welcoming him back for 2024.

Perhaps the emergence of young coaches is one of the biggest themes and pluses of this year's state competitions. In Rio Grande do Sul, Thiago Carvalho produced an impressively calm possession-based side with little Caxias, who went all the way to the final and only went down 2-1 on aggregate to Gremio after Luis Suarez converted a penalty. With the Uruguay striker making an excellent start to his new adventure, Gremio won their sixth title in a row. Meanwhile in Minas Gerais, another veteran striker was key as Atletico Mineiro won their fourth straight title – Hulk proved the deciding factor in the 5-2 aggregate win over America Mineiro in the final.

There was a fifth straight win for Fortaleza in the Ceara state championship, with plenty of drama along the way. It took an 89th-minute goal to give them a 4-3 aggregate triumph over Ceara, in one of the few finals between the biggest teams.

A sequence of surprises meant that there were few big clashes in the two-legged finals

ABOVE: Thumping... striker German Cano celebrates scoring for Fluminense in a 4-1 second-leg win over Flamengo in Rio

ABOVE RIGHT: Wonderkid...Palmeiras young gun Endrick lifts the Sao Paulo state championship trophy

There was another one in the state of Goias, where Atletico Goianiense beat Goias in a penalty shootout. At the end of last year Atletico were relegated from the national first division, while Goias remain in the top flight. But the latter may well have harmed their prospects by responding to local defeat with the dismissal of coach Guto Ferreira with less than a week to go before the league kicks off. It barely seems credible that a club would take such a decision – after losing on penalties – so close to the most important competition of the season. But this is typical of the way that Brazilian football operates, and of the instability caused by the state championships.

Some see them as pre-season, but there is a difference: this is a pre-season with jobs on the line.

One club that in recent years wanted nothing to do with the state championships is Athletico Paranaense. They had the custom of not fielding their strongest team in the Parana competition, preferring to use the tournament to bring along younger players. This year, though, they had a change of heart, played the first team and were rewarded with the title, although the 2-1 aggregate win over little Cascavel will not live long in the memory.

Excellent start...Luis Suarez celebrates scoring a penalty for Gremio in the Rio Grande do Sul final

Lebanon

JOHN DUERDEN

Chaos reigns in Lebanese Premier League showdown

Season finale overshadowed by violent scenes as Al Ahed claim ninth title

Violent scenes... riot police attempt to quell the fans *Credit: MTV Lebanon*

For once, a season in Lebanon was approaching the finish line with the focus on the football. Empty stadiums, crowd violence and financial issues have all come to dominate the football headlines, particularly since the pandemic, but this season it seemed that the 12-team top flight was in for a normal end to the campaign. But it was not to be.

Al Ansar and Al Ahed met on the last day of the season with both having a chance of lifting the trophy at the end of the 90 minutes. However the title decider never finished and, once again, the headlines at the end of the season were negative.

Going into the game, Al Ansar needed a win to become champions for a record 15th time while Ahed needed just a point for number nine. This was the third campaign with the current system that sees the 12 teams playing each other once and then splitting into two groups of six and then playing again twice. It seemed to work out perfectly in producing a final-day decider. Bosses at the federation knew that it was going to be a highly-charged affair, drafting in a referee from Oman to take charge of the big game.

There were perhaps 2,000 fans in the stadium, located just north of Beirut in a neutral venue, the Fouad Chehab Stadium, all crammed into one long stand behind the benches. Ansar fans were in the left half with the supporters of their local rivals on the right, and there was quite an atmosphere with the tackles flying in from the get go.

> The title decider never finished and, once again, the headlines at the end of the season were negative

Five minutes before the break, Rabih Ataya put Al Ahed ahead from close range. Ansar piled on the pressure in search of an equaliser and passions rose when one was ruled out in the second half as the referee had already stopped play. In protest, the home fans shook the barriers that divided sections of the terraces and climbed over those at the front to throw bottles onto the pitch, followed by flares and smoke bombs. That led to a 15-minute delay in play during which club president Nabil Badr pleaded for calm on the terraces. On the other half of the pitchside terrace, Al Ahed fans were waving yellow scarves in the air, revelling in the anger of their rivals.

Once play finally resumed, Al Ansar levelled with a penalty converted by national team captain Hassan Maatouk six minutes from the end. But four minutes after that, Mohammad Nasser turned to fire an unstoppable shot into the top corner to restore Ahed's lead. This time the barriers that separated the pitch from the terraces shook with Ahed players wildly celebrating in front of supporters.

Given the delay there was still plenty of football to be played. Four minutes into stoppage-time Al Ansar drew level once more thanks to the veteran Maatouk, but two minutes after that a deflected free-kick from Scottish forward Lee Erwin put the visitors back ahead in front.

Soon after the restart, an altercation between two players just in front of the Al Ansar supporters sparked it all off again. As the Ansar players and officials tried to calm down their fans, just a few yards along the running track, Al Ahed celebrated with theirs. Soon the floodlights went out, the police were on the pitch and the players weren't.

The game was, in the end, abandoned and awarded to Al Ahed with a 3-0 scoreline. That meant the championship and Al Ansar in third. It also meant that the FA decided that all FA Cup games would be played behind closed doors, with further punishment for the losing team expected.

Fouad Chehab Stadium...the venue for the season finale

It was a sad end to the season and one that football in the country can ill-afford. With Lebanon's economy in dire straits, clubs have been struggling financially. Some have had to rely on the money received from the national team reaching the final round of qualification for the 2022 World Cup to keep going. The sight of objects raining down from the stand onto the field, police lined up with riot shields and the lights being turned off, don't help.

Al Ansar were not happy: "What happened surprised us," said club official Ayman Al Shami. "Unfortunately, a whole year's effort didn't count because of certain actions and the wrong refereeing decisions."

Al Ahed, meanwhile, blamed the authorities: "The Lebanese Football Association is responsible for the match not reaching the end due to its failure to manage," said club president Tamim Suleiman.

There are far bigger issues that Lebanon has to face than the destination of the league trophy but, once again, the game that the country loves so much was not able to provide much comfort or distraction.

Saint Lucia

STEVE MENARY

A league of their own

Significant investment in a new league could transform football on the Caribbean island

Potential host... the Daren Sammy Cricket Ground could be the venue for Saint Lucia's new league

Helping players on small Caribbean islands make a living from football is a perennial problem holding back the game's development in the region, but Saint Lucia is on the verge of a breakthrough.

The Saint Lucia Football Association (SLFA) is developing plans for a new league and offering to put in $500,000 a season, which they want the island's government to match.

The long-term plan is for two divisions – one of ten teams and a second tier of nine clubs – drawn from the SLFA's district associations. If an agreement can be reached, a debut season could start between August and November this year and run for eight to nine months.

"One of the challenges for football in a lot of the Caribbean islands is that [when] kids get to a certain age they have to choose between playing football and earning a living," says Brent Sancho, the former Trinidad & Tobago international, who is working as an advisor to the SLFA.

"We have some players who play in Antigua. They get $500-a-month and accommodation, but they don't train enough. If the government match what the FA are proposing, then we can really do something."

Sancho, who played professionally in Europe and at the 2006 World Cup finals, began working in Saint Lucia in May 2022 along with former team-mate Stern John, who took over as head coach of the island's national team.

Under John, Saint Lucia enjoyed a 100 per cent record in the latest Nations League campaign, topping their group in League C. Their four wins against Dominica and Anguilla brought promotion to League B and a place in the preliminary round of this summer's CONCACAF Gold Cup, where their opponents will be more daunting.

Sancho adds: "When they go and play against teams from Costa Rica or the USA, they are playing against full-time professionals. The same when they play against Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and my island, Trinidad. Players can earn a living from football there and do not have to work.

"I could see it starting with ten teams. You want to be able to eat a little and live long. It's better starting that way then expanding. The league will certainly help the national team."

Where matches will be played is still up for debate. The league is the result of a decade-long push against privately run club tournaments in the country.

The structure of the game has changed with competitions organised by the 18 district associations, whose presidents overwhelmingly re-elected SLFA president Lyndon Cooper in February. Sabina Charles-Kirton from Marchand had been expected to stand in opposition, but withdrew before the poll and 16 associations supported Cooper with Marchand and Castries abstaining.

> "The league will certainly help the national team"
>
> Brent Sancho, Saint Lucia Football Association advisor

If the new league goes ahead, the districts are likely to push for staging games locally, but Sancho advocates a central venue such as the Daren Sammy Cricket Ground, where John's team play.

"When I was a boy in Trinidad, we had one place in Port of Spain and my dad would take me and it was packed to the rafters as everyone knew that there would be a game there," adds Sancho. "I am a strong believer in one central venue, but I think they will want to play in the parishes. That's a fight we have to have."

After years of stagnation, that one final hurdle could clear the way to real change for football in Saint Lucia.

National team ...Saint Lucia's players line up

MAY 12-JUNE 11

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

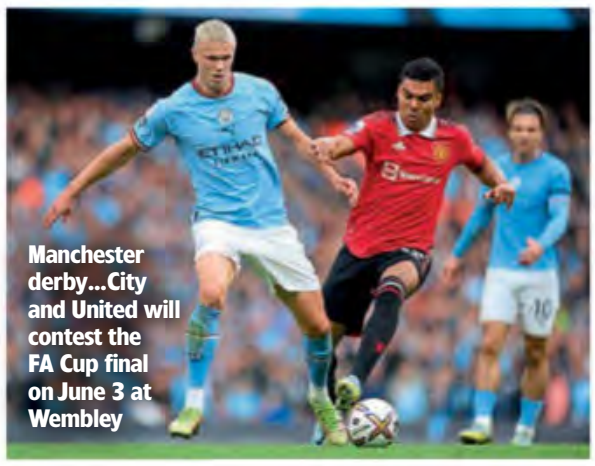
Mexico v USA

The semi-finals of this year's CONCACAF Champions League – Tigres UANL v Leon and Philadelphia Union v LAFC – took place after this issue went to print, but it means that the final will be a showdown between Major League Soccer and LigaMX. Last year, Seattle Sounders ended Mexico's 16-year domination of the competition after defeating Pumas UNAM in the final – will normal service be resumed when the two-legged final takes place on May 31 and June 4? Elsewhere, the African Champions League final (also a two-legged affair) takes place on June 4 and 11, although the quarter-finals were not finished at the time of writing.

Mexico v USA...the CONCACAF Champions League trophy

Season finales

As the summer begins, the football season ends. The German Bundesliga is the first of Europe's "Big Five" leagues to come to a conclusion, on Saturday May 27, with the Premier League ending a day later, before La Liga, Ligue 1 and Serie A all come to an end the following weekend, June 3-4. The major domestic cup finals in Italy (May 24), and Germany and England (both June 3) are also coming up, while the English Football League play-offs run from Friday May 12 to Saturday May 20, with the finals for each division taking place from Saturday May 27 to Monday May 29.



Manchester derby...City and United will contest the FA Cup final on June 3 at Wembley

European semi-finals

The six finalists for Europe's three major club competitions will all be decided between May 16 and 18, starting with the second leg of the Milan derby in the Champions League semi-final. The following day Real Madrid take on Manchester City at the Bernabeu, then a day later it's Sevilla v Juventus and Bayer Leverkusen v Roma in the Europa League, and Basel v Fiorentina and AZ v West Ham United in the Europa Conference League.

Under-17 championships

Hungary will host this year's UEFA Euro Under-17 Championship, where France will attempt to defend their title after beating Netherlands in last year's final. The tournament begins on May 17 and ends on June 2. Elsewhere, the Under-17 Africa Cup of Nations kicked off at the end of April and concludes on May 19.

Holders... France won last year's Euro U17 Championship

5 unmissable matches

- **Sporting v Benfica, May 21**
  The penultimate game of the Portuguese Primeira Liga season should have been a top-of-the-table showdown between the two Lisbon giants, but could instead see Benfica's coronation as champions at the home of their big local rivals.

- **Juventus/Sevilla v Roma/Bayer Leverkusen, May 31**
  Budapest's Puskas Arena will host this year's Europa League final. Sevilla and Juventus will hope to overcome testing domestic campaigns by winning the trophy, while Roma could win their second European title in a row if they get past Bayer Leverkusen.

Up for grabs...Women's Champions League trophy

- **Chelsea/Barcelona v Wolfsburg/Arsenal, June 3**
  The Women's Champions League final in Eindhoven's Philips Stadion adds to a stellar fortnight of major European finals. This season will be only the second time since 2015 that a team other than Lyon have won the trophy.

- **Fiorentina/Basel v West Ham United/AZ, June 7**
  The four teams left in this year's Europa Conference League semi-finals have won just two European titles between them, and none since 1965, so whoever lifts the trophy in Prague's Fortuna Arena will cherish it.

- **Real Madrid/Manchester City v Milan/Internazionale, June 10**
  The most important game in European club football takes place on Saturday, June 10 at Istanbul's Ataturk Olympic Stadium, the scene of one of the most famous finals in the competition's history: Liverpool's unforgettable comeback against Milan in 2005.

Internationals

EURO 2024 QUALIFIERS

Group A

Mar 28 – Batumi
Georgia 1 (Mikautadze 60)
Norway 1 (Sorloth 15)
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze, Kvirkvelia, Kashia, Tabidze (Zivzivadze 59), Azarov (Gocholeishvili 70); Davitashvili (Lobzhanidze 59), Kvekveskiri, Aburjania (Gagnidze 90); Mikautadze (Beridze 90), Kvaratskhelia.
Norway: Nyland – Pedersen (Ryerson 90+5), Strandberg, Ostigard, Meling; Odegaard, Berg (Thorstvedt 90+5), Aursnes; Solbakken (Brynhildsen 82), Sorloth, Elyounoussi (Berge 77).

Mar 28 – Glasgow
Scotland 2 (McTominay 7, 51)
Spain 0
Scotland: Gunn – Porteous, Hanley, Tierney (Cooper 75); Hickey (Patterson 82), McTominay, McGregor, Robertson; McGinn (Ferguson 83), Dykes (Shankland 90), Christie (McLean 75).
Spain: Kepa – Porro (Carvajal 46), D. Garcia, Martinez, Gaya; Merino (Aspas 57), Rodri, Ceballos (Gavi 79); Yeremy, Joselu (Iglesias 66), Oyarzabal (Williams 46).

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Scotland	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Spain	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Norway	2	0	1	1	1	4	1
Georgia	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Cyprus	1	0	0	1	0	3	0

Group B

Mar 27 – Rotterdam
Netherlands 3 (Depay 23, Ake 50, 82)
Gibraltar 0
Netherlands: Cillessen – Dumfries, De Ligt (Malacia 76), Van Dijk, Ake; Wijnaldum (Gakpo 46), Wieffer (Blind 63), Depay (Klaassen 63); Berghuis (Malen 46), Weghorst, Simons.
Gibraltar: Coleing – Sargeant, R. Chipolina, Lopes, Olivero, Britto; Walker, Torrilla (Hartman 86), Ronan (Mouelhi 77), Casciaro (Valarino 86); Coombes (Jolley 65).
Sent off: Walker 51.

Mar 27 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0
France 1 (Pavard 50)
Republic of Ireland: Bazunu – Collins, Egan, O'Shea (Browne 78); Coleman, Molumby (Obafemi 86), Cullen, Doherty (McClean 77); Ogbene, Knight (Johnston 77), Ferguson (Idah 65).
France: Maignan – Pavard (Kounde 81), Konate, Upamecano, T. Hernandez; Griezmann, Camavinga, Rabiot (Tchouameni 81); Kolo Muani (Thuram 90+3), Giroud (Diaby 65), Mbappe.

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Greece	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Netherlands	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Rep of Ireland	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Gibraltar	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

Group C

Mar 26 – Wembley
England 2 (Kane 37, Saka 40)
Ukraine 0
England: Pickford – Walker, Maguire, Stones, Chilwell; Henderson, Rice, Bellingham (Gallagher 86); Saka, Kane (Toney 81), Maddison (Grealish 85).
Ukraine: Trubin – Karavaev (Buyalskyi 61), Svatok, Matvienko, Mykolenko (Sobol 62); Stepanenko (Konoplyanka 90), Zinchenko; Malinovskyi, Sudakov, Mudryk (Tsygankov 61); Yaremchuk (Dovbyk 74).

Mar 26 – Ta'Qali
Malta 0
Italy 2 (Retegui 15, Pessina 27)
Malta: Bonello – Apap (Brown 83), Borg, Attard (Z. Muscat 64); J. Mbong, N. Muscat (Teuma 76), Guillaumier, Yankam, Corbalan; Satariano (Nwoko 64), Jones (Dimech 76).
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo (Darmian 46), Scalvini (Toloi 83), Romagnoli, Emerson; Pessina, Cristante, Tonali (Verratti 67); Politano, Retegui (Scamacca 66), Gnonto (Grifo 22).

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
England	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Italy	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
N Macedonia	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Ukraine	1	0	0	1	0	2	0
Malta	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group D

Mar 28 – Bursa
Turkey 0
Croatia 2 (Kovacic 20, 45)
Turkey: Gunok – Celik, Demiral, Soyuncu, Kadioglu; Kokcu (Guler 67), Ozcan; Under (Tosun 81), Calhanoglu (Yuksek 38), Akturkoglu (Yilmaz 67); Unal (Nayir 81).
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic, Sutalo, Gvardiol, Barisic; Modric (Majer 84), Brozovic, Kovacic; Pasalic (Juranovic 65), Kramaric (Musa 84), Perisic (Ivanusec 90+2).

Mar 28 – Cardiff
Wales 1 (Moore 41)
Latvia 0
Wales: Ward – Mepham, Rodon, Williams; C. Roberts, Morrell, Ampadu, D. James (Broadhead 73); Wilson (Cabango 90+4), Ramsey (Cooper 90+2); Moore.
Latvia: Steinbors – Savalnieks, Oss, Cernomordijs, Sorokins (Jurkovskis 46); J. Ikaunieks (Jaunzems 59), Tobers, Zjuzins (Saveljevs 83), Ciganiks (Varslavans 70); Gutkovskis, Uldrikis (Krollis 82).

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Croatia	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Wales	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Turkey	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Armenia	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Latvia	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Group E

Mar 27 – Chisinau
Moldova 0
Czech Republic 0
Moldova: Railean – Craciun, Mudrac, Posmac; Revenco (Platica 83), Motpan (Postolachi 59), Rata, Caimacov, S. Cojocari; Nicolaescu (Stina 83), Damascan (M. Cojocari 14).
Czech Republic: Pavlenka – Holes, Brabec, Jemelka; Coufal, Soucek, Barak (Sevcik 73), D. Jurasek; Kuchta (Chytil 73), Hlozek (Lingr 82), Cvancara.

Mar 27 – Warsaw
Poland 1 (Swiderski 41)
Albania 0
Poland: Szczesny – Frankowski, Salamon, Bednarek, Kiwior; Zalewski (Skoras 68), Linetty (D. Szymanski 78), Zielinski, Kaminski; Swiderski (S. Szymanski 88), Lewandowski.
Albania: Strakosha – Balliu, Kumbulla, Mihaj, Hysaj; Gjasula (Laci 88); Asani (Mehmeti 70), Ramadani, Asllani (Bajrami 76), Uzuni; Cikalleshi (Seferi 76).

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Czech Rep	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Poland	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Moldova	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Faroe Islands	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Albania	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Group F

Mar 27 – Linz
Austria 2 (Kainz 68, Gregoritsch 88)
Estonia 1 (Sappinen 25)
Austria: Lindner – Posch (Onisiwo 82), Daniliuc (Alaba 46), Danso, Mwene; Laimer, Siewald, Ljubicic (Adamu 46); Baumgartner (Schmid 90+2), Wimmer (Kainz 61); Gregoritsch.
Estonia: Hein – Paskotsi, Tamm, Mets; Sinyavskiy, Vassiljev, Kait, Miller (Shein 78), Pikk (Tunjov 90+1); Zenjov (Reinkort 90+1); Sappinen (Ojamaa 84).

Mar 27 – Solna
Sweden 5 (Forsberg 38, Mustafazade 65 og, Gyokeres 79, Karlsson 88, Elanga 89)
Azerbaijan 0
Sweden: Olsen – Wahlqvist, Lindelof, Ekdal (Hien 46), Gudmundsson; Kulusevski (Karlsson 82), Gustafson, Svanberg, Forsberg (Karlstrom 71); Gyokeres (Elanga 81), Isak (Claesson 71).
Azerbaijan: Balayev – Haghverdi (Huseynov 73), Mustafazade, Krivotsyuk, Cafarguliyev (Alaskarov 73); Mahmudov, Almeida, Isayev (Gurbanli 82); Bayramov, Dadashov, Sheydayev.

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Austria	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
Belgium	1	1	0	1	3	0	3
Sweden	2	1	0	1	5	3	3
Estonia	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Azerbaijan	2	0	0	2	1	9	0

Group G

Mar 27 – Budapest
Hungary 3 (Vecsei 7, Szoboszlai 26, Adam 39)
Bulgaria 0
Hungary: Dibusz – Lang, Orban, Szalai; Bolla (Nego 87), Nagy (Kleinheisler 73), Vecsei (Kalmar 87), Kerkez; Szoboszlai, Sallai (Csoboth 73), Adam (Varga 59).
Bulgaria: Naumov – Stoyanov, Galabov, Antov, Markov (Petrov 46), Petkov; Gruev (Shopov 85), Karabelyov (Krastev 46), N. Iliev; Despodov (Kirilov 57), Delev (Rusev 46).

Mar 27 – Podgorica
Montenegro 0
Serbia 2 (Vlahovic 78, 90+5)
Montenegro: Mijatovic – Vujacic, Savic, Tomasevic (Spicic 41); Vesovic, Savicevic (Jovovic 70), Skecic (Loncar 76), Haksabanovic (Camaj 77), Marusic; Jovetic (Osmajic 71), Krstovic.
Serbia: V. Milinkovic-Savic – Milenkovic, Gudelj, Pavlovic; Djuricic (Vlahovic 46), Ilic (Zivkovic 46), Grujic (Lukic 81), Mladenovic; Tadic (Erakovic 89), S. Milinkovic-Savic; A. Mitrovic (Racic 85).

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Serbia	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Hungary	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Montenegro	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Lithuania	1	0	0	1	0	2	0
Bulgaria	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group H

Mar 26 – Astana
Kazakhstan 3 (Zaynutdinov 73 pen, Tagybergen 86, Aymbetov 89)
Denmark 2 (Hojlund 21, 35)
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Gabyshev (Skvortsov 34), Maliy (Erlanov 46), Marochkin, Alip, Vorogovskiy; Zaynutdinov (Islamkhan 79), Beisebekov (Darabayev 83), Tagybergen; Orazov, Samorodov (Aymbetov 78).
Sent off: Aymbetov 90+6.
Denmark: Schmeichel – Bah (Stryger Larsen 64), Kjaer, Nelsson, Maehle (Kristensen 83); Hojbjerg, Norgaard, M. Jensen (Billing 65); Wind (Braithwaite 87), Hojlund, Damsgaard (Daramy 65).

Mar 26 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 2 (Sesko 56, Di Maio 60 og)
San Marino 0
Slovenia: Oblak – Stojanovic, Brekalo, Bijol (Drkusic 36), Karnicnik (Balkovec 58); Zajc (Gorenc Stankovic 82), Cerin, Lovric, Verbic (Horvat 82); Vombergar (Vipotnik 58), Sesko.
San Marino: E. Benedettini – Fabbri (Franciosi 73), Rossi (Di Maio 46), Cevoli; D'Addario, Golinucci, Mi. Battistini, Lunadei (Vitaioli 73), Tosi; Beradi (Lazzari 58), Nanni (Rinaldi 86).

Mar 26 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 0
Finland 1 (Kalmann 28)
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – Ballard (Magennis 50), Cathcart, Brown; Bradley, McNair, S. Charles (Price 79), Thompson (Saville 79), Lewis; D. Charles, Washington (Whyte 69).
Finland: Hradecky – Alho (Taylor 87), L. Vaisanen, Ivanov, R. Jensen (Peltola 52); Lod, Schuller, Kamara, Suhonen (Soiri 70); Kallman (Pohjanpalo 87), Pukki (Forss 70).

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slovenia	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Denmark	2	1	0	1	5	4	3
Kazakhstan	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Finland	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
N Ireland	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
San Marino	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group I

Mar 28 – Prishtina
Kosovo 1 (Zhegrova 59)
Andorra 1 (Berto 61)
Kosovo: Muric – Hadergjonaj, Rrahmani, Kryeziu, Paqarada (Rrudhani 46); Celina (Muslija 75), Fazliji, Bersiha (Zhegrova 46); Rashica, Muriqi, Zeneli (Bytyqi 75).
Andorra: Alvarez – Chus Rubio, Llovera, Guillen, Alavedra, M. Garcia (San Nicolas 78); J. Rubio (Martinez 69), M. Vales, E. Vales, Cervos (Bernat 90+1); Berto (Pujol 90+1).

Mar 28 – Bucharest
Romania 2 (Stanciu 17, Burca 19)
Belarus 1 (Morozov 86)
Romania: Radu – Manea, Dragusin, Burca, Oprut; R. Marin, Baluta (Cicaldau 44), Stanciu (M. Marin 77); Morutan (Dobre 65), Alibec (Tanase 77), Man (Popescu 65).
Belarus: Plotnikov – Bykov, Volkov, Khadarkevich, Malkevich; Kovalev (Grechikho 85), Selyava, Yablonskiy (Klimovich 65), Bakhar (Morozov 78); Ebong, Khvashchinskiy (Yuzepchuk 46).

Mar 28 – Geneva
Switzerland 3 (Vargas 39, Amdouni 47, Widmer 52)
Israel 0
Switzerland: Sommer – Widmer, Akanji, Elvedi, Rodriguez (Fernandes 85); Freuler, Zakaria (Rieder 74), Xhaka; Amdouni (Steffen 69), Vargas (Fassnacht 74); Itten (Okafor 68).
Israel: O. Glazer – Dasa, Vitor, Shlomo, Leidner; Haziza (Yehezkel 53), Dor Peretz (Kanichowsky 73), Lavi, Solomon; Baribo (Weissman 63), Jaber (Gloukh 54).

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Switzerland	2	2	0	0	8	0	6
Romania	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Kosovo	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Andorra	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
Israel	2	0	1	1	1	4	1
Belarus	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Group J

Mar 26 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Iceland 7 (Olafsson 3, Haraldsson 38, Gunnarsson 48, 68, 73 pen, Gudjohnsen 85, Ellertsson 87)
Liechtenstein: Buchel – S. Wolfinger (Yildiz 72), Frommelt, Traber, Hofer, Meier (F. Wolfinger 46); Luchinger (Netzer 46), Hasler, Wieser (Beck 77); Gassner (Frick 68), Sele.
Iceland: Runarsson – Palsson, Gunnarsson (Bergmann Johannesson 75), H. Magnusson (Sampsted 65), Olafsson; A. Sigurdsson (Ellertsson 65), Gudmundsson (Anderson 46), Thordharsson, Thorsteinsson; Finnbogason (Gudjohnsen 65), Haraldsson.

Mar 26 – Luxembourg
Luxembourg 0
Portugal 6 (Ronaldo 9, 31, Felix 15, Bernardo 18, Otavio 77, Leao 88)

Luxembourg: Moris – Jans, M. Martins (Bohnert 46), Chanot, Gerson (Carlson 46), Pinto; V. Thill (Borges Sanches 70), C. Martins (S. Thill 82), Barreiro, Rodrigues; Da. Sinani (Olesen 46).
Portugal: Patricio – Antonio Silva, Dias, Danilo; Dalot, Palhinha (Jota 87), Fernandes (Leao 75), Mendes; Bernardo (Neves 64), Felix (Otavio 75), Ronaldo (Ramos 65).

Mar 26 – Bratislava
Slovakia 2 (Mak 13, Haraslin 40)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 0
Slovakia: Dubravka – Pekarik, Gyomber, Vavro, Hancko; Kucka, Lobotka (Hrosovsky 90+2), Duda (Benes 69); Mak (Suslov 58), Polievka (Zrel'ak 69), Haraslin (Bero 90+2).
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Sehic – Dedic, Ahmedhodzic, Milicevic (Cimirot 46), Sanicanin, Gazibegovic; Hadziahmetovic (Prcic 63), Tahirovic (Stevanovic 74), Krunic; Prevljak (Dzeko 63), Demirovic.

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal	2	2	0	0	10	0	6
Slovakia	2	1	1	1	2	0	4
Bosnia-Herz	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Iceland	2	1	0	1	7	3	3
Luxembourg	2	0	1	1	0	6	1
Liechtenstein	2	0	0	2	0	11	0

2022-23 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Group A

Mar 23 – Paramaribo
Suriname 0
Mexico 2 (Vasquez 64, Dankerlui 82 og)

Mar 26 – Mexico City
Mexico 2 (Pineda 17, Lozano 45+2 pen)
Jamaica 2 (Decordova-Reid 8, Alvarez 33 og)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mexico (Q)	4	2	2	0	8	3	8
Jamaica	4	1	3	0	7	5	6
Suriname	4	0	1	3	2	9	1

Group B

Mar 25 – Fort-de-France
Martinique 1 (Biron 18)
Costa Rica 2 (Suarez 88, Contreras 90+2)

Mar 28 – San Jose
Costa Rica 0
Panama 1 (Fajardo 77)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Panama (Q)	4	3	1	0	8	0	10
Costa Rica	4	2	0	2	4	4	6
Martinique	4	0	1	3	1	9	1

Group C

Mar 25 – Willemstad
Curacao 0
Canada 2 (David 23, Larin 43)

Mar 28 – Toronto
Canada 4 (Larin 9, 12, David 50, Osorio 80)
Honduras 1 (Benguche 73)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Canada (Q)	4	3	0	1	11	3	9
Honduras	4	2	0	2	5	7	6
Curacao	4	1	0	3	2	8	3

Group D

Mar 24 – St George's
Grenada 1 (Hippolyte 32)
United States 7 (Pepi 4, 53, Aaronson 20, McKennie 31, 34, Pulisic 49, Zendejas 72)

Mar 27 – Orlando
United States 1 (Pepi 62)
El Salvador 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USA (Q)	3	3	1	0	14	2	10
El Salvador	3	1	2	1	6	5	5
Grenada	3	0	1	3	4	17	1

• *The League A group winners qualify for the CONCACAF Nations League finals. The top two teams in each group in League A also qualify for the 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup, with the bottom teams advancing to the Gold Cup preliminaries*

League B

Group A

Mar 23 – Bridgetown
Barbados 0
Cuba 1 (M. Reyes 3)

Mar 23 – Les Abymes
Guadeloupe 0
Antigua & Barbuda 1 (Nathaniel-George 57)

Mar 26 – North Sound
Antigua & Barbuda 1 (Weston 31)
Barbados 2 (Gale 62, James 87)

Mar 26 – Santiago de Cuba
Cuba 1 (Matos 45+2)
Guadeloupe 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cuba (P)	6	5	0	1	11	3	15
Guadeloupe	6	3	0	3	5	5	9
Antigua & Barbuda	6	3	0	3	5	7	9
Barbados	6	1	0	5	3	9	1

Group B

Mar 25 – St John's
Montserrat 0
Haiti 4 (Nazon 49, Pierrot 60, Etienne 70, Prunier 84)

Mar 25 – Devonshire Parish
Bermuda 0
Guyana 2 (Gordon 52, Garrett 58)

Mar 28 – Bridgetown
Guyana 0
Montserrat 0

Mar 28 – San Cristobal
Haiti 3 (Pierrot 25, 26, Antoine 45+4)
Bermuda 1 (Bean 75)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Haiti (P)	6	5	1	0	22	5	16
Guyana	6	3	1	2	8	14	10
Bermuda	6	1	1	4	7	10	4
Montserrat	6	1	1	4	6	14	4

Group C

Mar 24 – Nassau
Bahamas 0
Trinidad & Tobago 3 (Moses 5, J. Jones 26, Telfer 34)

Mar 24 – Managua
Nicaragua 4 (Smith 3, Barrera 42, Moldskred Belli 60, Flores 90+2)
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Edwards 18 pen)

Mar 27 – Arnos Vale
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Edwards 59 pen)
Bahamas 1 (Joseph 70)

Mar 27 – Scarborough
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (J. Jones 42)
Nicaragua 1 (Smith 28)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nicaragua (P)	6	4	2	0	15	5	14
Trinidad & Tob	6	4	1	1	12	4	13
Bahamas	6	1	1	4	2	11	4
St Vincent/Gren	6	0	2	4	5	14	2

Group D

Mar 23 – Remire-Montjoly
French Guiana 1 (Legrand 86)
Domincan Republic 1 (Heredia 90+4)

Mar 24 – Belmopan
Belize 1 (Polanco 45+1)
Guatemala 2 (Castellanos 30, Santis 44)

Mar 27 – San Cristobal
Domincan Republic 2 (Reyes 13, Lorenzo 60)
Belize 0

Mar 27 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 4 (Mendez 60, Sequen 76, Samayoa 80, Aparicio 90+2)
French Guiana 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guatemala (P)	6	4	1	1	11	4	13
French Guiana	6	3	2	1	8	8	11
Domincan Rep	6	2	2	2	8	7	8
Belize	6	0	1	5	2	10	1

• *In addition to promotion to League A, the League B group winners also qualify for the 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup, with the runners-up advancing to the Gold Cup preliminaries*

League C

Group A

Mar 25 – Saint Croix
Sint Maarten 6 (Michiel 5 og, Lake 9, 55, 84 pen, Amatkarijo 46, Illidge 62)
Bonaire 1 (Montero 69)

Mar 25 – Providenciales
Turks & Caicos Islands 1 (Beljour 69)
US Virgin Islands 0

Mar 28 – Saint Croix
US Virgin Islands 1 (Kendall 76)
Sint Maarten 2 (Lake 58, Cox 86)

Mar 28 – Rincon
Bonaire 1 (Montero 2)
Turks & Caicos Islands 2 (Forbes 18, 40)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sint Maarten (P)	6	3	2	1	19	9	11
Bonaire	6	3	1	2	12	11	10
Turks & Caicos	6	3	0	3	10	16	9
US Virgin Islands	6	1	1	4	5	10	4

Group B

Mar 23 – The Valley
Saint Martin 1 (Arne 31)
St Kitts & Nevis 3 (T. Williams 26, Sawyers 35, Panayiotou 89)

Mar 26 – Basseterre
St Kitts & Nevis 2 (Freeman 45+1, 80)
Aruba 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Kitts & Nevis (P)	4	3	1	0	9	4	10
Aruba	4	1	1	2	5	5	4
Saint Martin	4	0	2	2	2	7	2

Group C

Mar 24 – The Valley
Anguilla 1 (Carpenter 76)
Saint Lucia 2 (Remy 18, President 45+2)

Mar 27 – Gros Islet
Saint Lucia 3 (President 19, Frederick 40, 62)
Dominica 1 (Thomas 84)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saint Lucia (P)	4	4	0	0	8	2	12
Dominca	4	0	2	2	2	5	2
Anguilla	4	0	2	2	2	5	2

Group D

Mar 23 – Road Town
British Virgin Islands 1 (T. Forbes 36 pen)
Puerto Rico 3 (Antonetti 44, Vega 46, Silva 90+4)

Mar 26 – Bayamon
Puerto Rico 5 (Rivera 2, 70, Diaz 40, Burgos 89, 90+2)
Cayman Islands 1 (Studenhofft 85)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Puerto Rico (P)	4	4	0	0	17	2	12
Cayman Islands	4	0	2	2	3	10	2
British Virgin Is	4	0	2	2	3	11	2

• *In addition to promotion to League B, the League C group winners also qualify for the 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup preliminaries*

AFCON 2023 QUALIFIERS

Group A

Mar 22 – Agadir
Sierra Leone 2 (Bundu 48, Komeh 78)
Sao Tome & Principe 2 (Leal 43, 59)

Mar 24 – Abuja
Nigeria 0
Guinea-Bissau 1 (M. Balde 29)

Mar 26 – Agadir
Sao Tome & Principe 0
Sierra Leone 2 (Samura 7, Alh. Koroma 28)

Mar 27 – Bissau
Guinea-Bissau 0
Nigeria 1 (Simon 30 pen)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nigeria	4	3	0	1	13	2	9
Guinea-Bissau	4	2	1	1	8	4	7
Sierra Leone	4	1	2	1	7	6	5
Sao Tome/Principe	4	0	1	3	3	19	1

Group B

Mar 24 – Marrakesh
Burkina Faso 1 (A. Tapsoba 87)
Togo 0

Mar 24 – Praia
Cape Verde 0
Eswatini 0

Mar 28 – Lome
Togo 1 (Laba 26)
Burkina Faso 1 (D. Ouattara 12)

Mar 28 – Mbombela
Eswatini 0
Cape Verde 1 (Mendes 56)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Burkina Faso (Q)	4	3	1	0	7	2	10
Cape Verde	4	2	1	1	3	2	7
Eswatini	4	0	2	2	3	6	2
Togo	4	0	2	2	3	6	2

Group C

Mar 24 – Yaounde
Cameroon 1 (Kemen 72)
Namibia 1 (Shalulile 26)

Mar 28 – Soweto
Namibia 2 (Shalulile 55, Iimbondi 79)
Cameroon 1 (Aboubakar 90+1)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Namibia	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Cameroon	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Burundi	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Kenya*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Kenya disqualified

Group D

Mar 24 – Cairo
Egypt 2 (Salah 20, Marmoush 45+1)
Malawi 0

Mar 24 – Casablanca
Guinea 2 (Kamano 39, Bayo 73)
Ethiopia 0

Mar 27 – Rabat
Ethiopia 2 (Markneh 34, Jemma 90+5)
Guinea 3 (Keita 4, Moriba 42, Guilavogui 70)

Mar 28 – Lilongwe
Malawi 0
Egypt 4 (Hamed 4, Marmoush 16, Salah 20, Zizo 49)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	4	3	0	1	7	2	9
Guinea	4	3	0	1	6	3	9
Malawi	4	1	0	3	2	8	3
Ethiopia	4	1	0	3	5	7	3

Group E

Mar 23 – Kumasi
Ghana 1 (Semenyo 90+6)
Angola 0

Mar 23 – Antananarivo
Madagascar 0
Central African Republic 3 (Ngoma 36, Mafouta 45, 79)

Mar 27 – Luanda
Angola 1 (Joao 51 pen)
Ghana 1 (Bukari 72)

Mar 27 – Douala
Central African Republic 2 (Mafouta 40, 82)
Madagascar 0

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana	4	2	2	0	6	2	8
Central African Rep	4	2	1	1	7	3	7
Angola	4	1	2	1	4	4	5
Madagascar	4	0	1	3	1	9	1

Group F

Mar 23 – Algiers
Algeria 2 (Alhassane 54 og, Mahrez 88)
Niger 1 (Sosah 38)

Mar 24 – Ismailia
Uganda 0
Tanzania 1 (Msuva 68)

Mar 27 – Tunis
Niger 0
Algeria 1 (Bounedjah 6)

Mar 28 – Dar es Salaam
Tanzania 0
Uganda 1 (Mato 90+1)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria (Q)	4	4	0	0	7	1	12
Tanzania	4	1	1	2	2	4	4
Uganda	4	1	1	2	2	4	4
Niger	4	0	2	2	3	5	2

Group G

Mar 23 – Brazzaville
Congo 1 (Bifouma 90 pen)
South Sudan 2 (Daniel 66, Okello 90+6)

Mar 24 – Bamako
Mali 2 (K. Doumbia 3, A. Traore 90+5)
Gambia 0

Mar 27 – Dar es Salaam
South Sudan 0
Congo 1 (Charpentier 90)

Mar 28– Casablanca
Gambia 1 (O. Colley 79)
Mali 0

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mali	4	3	0	1	9	2	9
Congo	4	2	0	2	3	6	6
Gambia	4	2	0	2	2	3	6
South Sudan	4	1	0	3	3	6	3

Group H

Mar 23 – Ndola
Zambia 3 (F. Sakala 37, L. Banda 53, 57)
Lesotho 1 (Bereng 33)

Mar 24 – Bouake
Ivory Coast 3 (Kouame 29, Haller 61, Krasso 89)
Comoros 1 (Djoudja 90+3)

Mar 26 – Johannesburg
Lesotho 0
Zambia 2 (Daka 14, 69)

Mar 28 – Moroni
Comoros 0
Ivory Coast 2 (I. Sangare 36, Kessie 58)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast (Q)	4	3	1	0	8	2	10
Zambia	4	3	0	1	8	5	9
Comoros	4	1	0	3	4	7	3
Lesotho	4	0	1	3	1	7	1

Group I

Mar 23 – Franceville
Gabon 1 (Palun 71)
Sudan 0

Mar 24 – Lubumbashi
DR Congo 3 (Kakuta 37, Bakambu 42, Masuaku 67)
Mauritania 1 (Abeid 55)

Mar 27 – Omdurman
Sudan 1 (Kome 67)
Gabon 0

Mar 28 – Nouakchott
Mauritania 1 (Soueid 57)
DR Congo 1 (Bakambu 9)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gabon	4	2	1	1	2	1	7
Sudan	4	2	0	2	3	5	6
Mauritania	4	1	2	1	5	4	5
DR Congo	4	1	1	2	5	5	4

Group J

Mar 24 – Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 2 (Coco 20, Bikoro 66)
Botswana 0

Mar 24– Tunis
Tunisia 3 (Msakni 12, Maaloul 21 pen, Jouini 86)
Libya 0

Mar 28 – Benghazi
Libya 0
Tunisia 1 (Jouini 16)

Mar 28 – Francistown
Botswana 2 (Elias 28, Seakanyeng 66 pen)
Equatorial Guinea 3 (Nsue 13, Ditsele 40 og, Salvador 51)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia (Q)	4	3	1	0	8	0	10
Eq Guinea	4	3	0	1	7	6	9
Libya	4	1	0	3	1	6	3
Botswana	4	0	1	3	2	6	1

Group K

Mar 24 – Johannesburg
South Africa 2 (Foster 11 pen, 22)
Liberia 2 (Tisdell 68, Sangare 90+1)

Mar 28 – Monrovia
Liberia 1 (Jebor 35)
South Africa 2 (Lepasa 19, Mayambela 53)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco (Q)	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
S. Africa (Q)	3	1	1	1	5	5	4
Liberia	3	0	1	2	3	6	1
Zimbabwe*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Zimbabwe disqualified*

Group L

Mar 22 – Cotonou
Benin 1 (Mounie 82)
Rwanda 1 (Mugisha 13)

Mar 24 – Dakar
Senegal 5 (Sabaly 9, Mane 15, Ndiaye 32, Dia 39, Diallo 88)
Mozambique 1 (Vilanculos 48)

Mar 28 – Maputo
Mozambique 0
Senegal 1 (Dia 18)

Mar 29 – Kigali
Rwanda 1 (Manzi 71)
Benin 1 (Dossou 57)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal (Q)	4	4	0	0	10	2	12
Mozambique	4	1	1	2	3	7	4
Rwanda	4	0	3	1	3	4	3
Benin	4	0	2	2	3	6	2

FRIENDLIES

Mar 11 – Montego Bay
Jamaica 0
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Moore 67)

Mar 15 – Medina
Bangladesh 1 (Bishwanath 89)
Malawi 1 (Msowoya 75)

Mar 15 – Kingston
Jamaica 0
Trinidad & Tobago 0

Mar 19 – Adama
Ethiopia 1 (Markneh 82)
Rwanda 0

Mar 20 – Lautoka
Fiji 1 (Joseph 22 pen)
Vanuatu 2 (Spokeyjack 18, Aru 45)

Mar 20 – Pirae
Tahiti 0
New Caledonia 2 (Makalu 69, Rokuad 88)

Mar 21 – Male
Maldives 1 (Aisam 8)
Pakistan 0

Mar 22 – Imphal
India 1 (Thapa 45+1)
Myanmar 0

Mar 22 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 3 (O'Dowda 6, Ferguson 17, Ogbene 65)
Latvia 2 (Uldrikis 33, Zjuzins 45+1)

Mar 22 – Kathmandu
Nepal 2 (Tamang 29, Nawayug 54)
Laos 0

Mar 23 – Los Angeles
El Salvador 0
Honduras 1 (Cartagena 34 og)

Mar 23 – Auckland
New Zealand 0
China 0

Mar 23 – Pirae
Tahiti 2 (Tinirauarii 30, 76)
New Caledonia 1 (Makalu 33)

Mar 23 – Tehran
Iran 1 (Taremi 47 pen)
Russia 1 (An. Miranchuk 28)

Mar 23 – Johor
Malaysia 1 (Akhyar 29)
Turkmenistan 0

Mar 23 – Budapest
Hungary 1 (Adam 41)
Estonia 0

Mar 23 – Lautoka
Solomon Islands 2 (Feni 68, Komasi 81)
Vanuatu 0

Mar 23 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 2 (Almada 78, Messi 89)
Panama 0

Mar 23 – Hong Kong
Hong Kong 1 (Tan 43 og)
Singapore 1 (Tan 10)

Mar 24 – Sydney
Australia 3 (Irvine 12, Mabil 32, G. Kuol 84)
Ecuador 1 (Torres 23)

Mar 24 – Tokyo
Japan 1 (Nishimura 75)
Uruguay 1 (Valverde 38)

Mar 24 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 2 (Al Fadhel 71, Khalaf 87)
Philippines 0

Mar 24– Ulsan
South Korea 2 (Son Heung-min 10, 45+2)
Colombia 2 (James 46, Carrascal 49)

Mar 24 – Jeddah
Uzbekistan 1 (Shomurodov 36)
Bolivia 0

Mar 24 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 1 (S. Al Dawsari 73)
Venezuela 2 (Josef Martinez 26, Rondon 34)

Mar 25 – Bekasi
Indonesia 3 (Sayuri 6, Sulistyawan 14, Ridho 44)
Burundi 1 (Niyongabire 51)

Mar 25 – Batumi
Georgia 6 (Volkovi 15, Chakvetadze 56, 58, Lobzhanidze 70, Beridze 88, Zivzivadze 90+1)
Mongolia 1 (Baljinnyam 31)

Mar 25 – Imphal
Myanmar 1 (Aung Thu 82)
Kyrgyzstan 1 (Zhyrgalbek Uulu 90+6)

Mar 25 – Dubai
Syria 3 (Al Somah 26, Khribin 56 pen, Al Hallak 85)
Thailand 1 (Suphanat 45+3)

Mar 25– Mainz
Germany 2 (Fullkrug 12, 33)
Peru 0

Mar 25 – Sylhet
Bangladesh 1 (Tariq 42)
Seychelles 0

Mar 25 – Tanger
Morocco 2 (Boufal 29, Sabiri 79)
Brazil 1 (Casemiro 67)

Mar 25 – Kathmandu
Laos 2 (Bounkong 3, 72)
Bhutan 1 (Gyeltshen 34)

Mar 25 – Arad
Bahrain 1 (Saeed 80)
Palestine 2 (Termanini 51, Batran 61)

Mar 25 – Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 0
Tajikistan 0

Mar 26 – Lautoka
Fiji 0
Solomon Islands 2 (Feni 40 pen, 53)

Mar 26 – Wellington
New Zealand 2 (Zhu Chenjie 42 og, Garbett 81)
China 1 (Ba Dun 90+2)

Mar 26 – St Petersburg
Russia 2 (An. Miranchuk 50, Pinyaev 58)
Iraq 0

Mar 26 – Taipa
Macau 0
Singapore 1 (Tan 66)

Mar 27 – Athens
Greece 0
Lithuania 0

Mar 27 – Skopje
North Macedonia 1 (Miovski 81)
Faroe Islands 0

Mar 27 – Muscat
Oman 2 (Al Sabhi 27, 80)
Lebanon 0

Mar 28 – Kathmandu
Nepal 1 (Thakuri 90)
Bhutan 1 (Norbu 19)

Mar 28 – Santiago de Chile
Chile 3 (Diaz 25, Sanchez 76, Silva 90+2 og)
Paraguay 2 (M. Rojas 32, Avalos 34)

Mar 28 – Imphal
India 2 (Jhingan 34, Chhetri 84 pen)
Kyrgyzstan 0

Mar 28 – Melbourne
Australia 1 (Borello 16)
Ecuador 2 (Estupinan 51 pen, Pacho 64)

Mar 28 –Johor
Malaysia 2 (Rashid 18, Halim 40)
Hong Kong 0

Mar 28 – Osaka
Japan 1 (Mitoma 3)
Colombia 2 (Duran 33, Borre 61)

Mar 28 – Seoul
South Korea 1 (Hwang In-beom 54)
Uruguay 2 (Coates 10, Vecino 63)

Mar 28 – Bekasi
Indonesia 2 (Sulaeman 61, Amat 90+4)
Burundi 2 (Berahino 80, Bigirimana 90)

Mar 28 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 2 (Al Fadhel 9, Al Khaldi 61)
Tajikistan 1 (A. Dzhalilov 90)

Mar 28 – Yerevan
Armenia 2 (Ranos 51, 59)
Cyprus 2 (Karo 43, Christofi 83)

Mar 28 – Tehran
Iran 2 (Mohebi 76, Rezaeian 84)
Kenya 1 (Olunga 51)

Mar 28 – Dubai
United Arab Emirates 2 (Abdalla 55, Mohamed 79)
Thailand 0

Mar 28 –Jeddah
Uzbekistan 1 (Yakhshiboyev 79 pen)
Venezuela 1 (A. Gonzalez 6)

Mar 28 – Cologne
Germany 2 (Fullkrug 44 pen, Gnabry 87)
Belgium 3 (Carrasco 6, Lukaku 9, De Bruyne 78)

Mar 28 –Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 1 (S. Al Dawsari 44 pen)
Bolivia 2 (Martins 13, Algaranaz 67)

Mar 28 – Sylhet
Bangladesh 0
Seychelles 1 (Mancienne 61 pen)

Mar 28 – Madrid
Morocco 0
Peru 0

Mar 28 – Arad
Bahrain 1 (Al Khalasi 43)
Syria 0

Mar 28 – Al Wakrah
Jordan 4 (Al Tamari 10 pen, 26, Al Naimat 56, Olwan 58)
Philippines 0

Mar 29 – Santiago del Estero
Argentina 7 (Messi 20, 33, 37, Gonzalez 23, Fernandez 35, Di Maria 78, Montiel 87)
Curacao 0

Mar 31 – Kathmandu
Nepal 2 (Ghalan 24, Dangi 87)
Laos 1 (Sangvilay 17)

WOMEN'S 2023 FINALISSIMA

Apr 6 – Wembley
England 1 (Toone 23)
Brazil 1 (Andressa 90+3)
England win 4-2 on penalties
England: Earps – Bronze, Williamson, Greenwood, Carter; Stanway, Walsh, Toone; James (Kelly 74), Russo (Daly 74), Hemp (Robinson 88).
Brazil: Leticia – Antonia (Gabi Nunes 87), Lauren (Andressa 46), Kathellen, Rafaelle, Tamires; Ary Borges (Fe Palermo 87), Luana (Duda Francelino 69), Kerolin; Beatriz (Adriana 46), Geyse.

Club football

EUROPE

2022-23 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Legs

Apr 11 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Barella 51, Lukaku 82 pen)

Apr 11 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (Rodri 27, Bernardo 70, Haaland 76)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 0

Apr 12 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Benzema 21, Asensio 74)
Chelsea (Eng) 0

Apr 12 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 1 (Bennacer 40)
Napoli (Ita) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Legs

Apr 18 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 0
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Rodrygo 58, 80)
Real Madrid win 4-0 on aggregate

Apr 18 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 1 (Osimhen 90+3)
Milan (Ita) 1 (Giroud 43)
Milan win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 19 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 3 (Barella 14, Martinez 65, Correa 78)
Benfica (Por) 3 (Aursnes 38, A. Silva 86, Musa 90)
Internazionale win 5-3 on aggregate

Apr 19 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Kimmich 83 pen)
Manchester City (Eng) 1 (Haaland 57)
Manchester City win 4-1 on aggregate

2022-23 UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Legs

Apr 13 – Manchester
Manchester United 2 (Sabitzer 14, 21)
Sevilla (Spa) 2 (Malacia 84 og, Maguire 90+2 og)

Apr 13 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Gatti 73)
Sporting (Por) 0

Apr 13 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Wirtz 82)
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Boniface 51)

Apr 13 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Wieffer 53)
Roma (Ita) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Legs

Apr 20 – Seville
Sevilla (Spa) 3 (En-Nesyri 8, 81, Bade 47)
Manchester United 0
Sevilla win 5-2 on aggregate

Apr 20 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 1 (Edwards 20 pen)
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Rabiot 9)
Juventus win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 20 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Terho 64)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 4 (Diaby 2, Bakker 38, Frimpong 60, Hlozek 79)
Bayer Leverkusen win 5-2 on aggregate

Apr 20 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 4 (Spinazzola 60, Dybala 89, El Shaarawy 101, Pellegrini 108)
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Paixao 80)
After Extra-Time
Roma win 4-2 on aggregate

2022-23 UEFA EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Legs

Apr 13 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 1 (Velde 40)
Fiorentina (Ita) 4 (Cabral 4, Gonzalez 41, Bonaventura 58, Ikone 63)

Apr 13 – Gent
Gent (Bel) 1 (Cuypers 57)
West Ham United (Eng) 1 (Ings 45+3)

Apr 13 – Brussels
Anderlecht (Bel) 2 (Murillo 22, Ashimeru 70)
AZ (Ned) 0

Apr 13 – Basel
Basel (Sui) 2 (Amdouni 26 pen, 71)
Nice (Fra) 2 (Moffi 38, 45+1)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Legs

Apr 20 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Sottil 78, Castrovilli 90+2)
Lech Poznan (Pol) 3 (Sousa 9, Velde 65 pen, Sobiech 69)
Fiorentina win 6-4 on aggregate

Apr 20 – London
West Ham United (Eng) 4 (Antonio 37, 63, Paqueta 55 pen, Rice 58)
Gent (Bel) 1 (Cuypers 26)
West Ham United win 5-2 on aggregate

Apr 20 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 2 (Pavlidis 5 pen, 13)
Anderlecht (Bel) 0
After Extra-Time
2-2 on aggregate. AZ win 4-1 on penalties

Apr 20 – Nice
Nice (Fra) 1 (Laborde 10)
Basel (Sui) 2 (Augustin 86, Nuhu 99)
After Extra-Time
Basel win 4-3 on aggregate

SOUTH AMERICA

2023 COPA LIBERTADORES

Group Stage

Group A

Apr 5 – Quito
Aucas (Ecu) 2 (Castillo 58, Ordonez 85)
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Franca 39)

Apr 5 – Concepcion
Nublense (Chi) 0
Racing (Arg) 2 (M. Rojas 16, Guerrero 54)

Apr 19 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Pedro 15, 38)
Nublense (Chi) 0

Apr 20 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 3 (M. Romero 12, Nardoni 17, Angel 86 og)
Aucas (Ecu) 2 (Castillo 48, Canga 56)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Flamengo	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Aucas	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Nublense	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group B

Apr 4 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 1 (Moreno 52)
Internacional (Bra) 1 (Alan Patrick 86)

Apr 4 – Caracas
Metropolitanos (Ven) 1 (Ortiz 52)
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Gigliotti 23, Ginella 90+1)

Apr 18 – Porto Alegre
Internacional (Bra) 1 (Alemao 90+1)
Metropolitanos (Ven) 0

Apr 19 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Pereiro 37, Noguera 90+6)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 1 (Pons 79)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nacional	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
Internacional	2	1	1	1	2	1	4
Ind Medellin	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Metropolitanos	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group C

Apr 5 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 2 (Aquino 28 pen, Churin 73)
Barcelona (Ecu) 1 (Ortiz 70)

Apr 5 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 3 (Hervias 20, Bejarano 45+1, Uzeda 89)
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Lopez 13)

Apr 19 – Guayaquil
Barcelona (Ecu) 2 (Gaibor 37, Bauman 75)
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Ron. Fernandez 70)

Apr 20 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Gomez 64, Navarro 76)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Bobadilla 5)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Cerro Porteno	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Barcelona	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Palmeiras	2	1	0	1	3	4	3

Group D

Apr 4 – La Paz
The Strongest (Bol) 3 (Triverio 25 pen, 35, Castillo 49)
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Beltran 66 pen)

Apr 5 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 1 (Grimaldo 18)
Fluminense (Bra) 3 (Cano 35, 59, Mendes 81)

Apr 18 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Nino 40)
The Strongest (Bol) 0

Apr 19 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 4 (De la Cruz 18, Barco 36, 52, Solari 61)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 2 (Ignacio 6, Corozo 41)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fluminense	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
The Strongest	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
River Plate	2	1	0	1	5	5	3
Sporting Cristal	2	0	0	2	3	7	0

Group E

Apr 4 – Buenos Aires
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 1 (Cabrera 46)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0

Apr 6 – Montevideo
Liverpool (Uru) 0
Corinthians (Bra) 3 (Balbuena 45+1, Guedes 49, 63)

Apr 18 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 2 (Sornoza 27, Minda 67)
Liverpool (Uru) 0

Apr 19 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 0
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 1 (Cabrera 13)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Argentinos Juniors	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Corinthians	2	1	0	1	3	1	3
Ind del Valle	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Liverpool	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group F

Apr 5 – Pereira
Deportivo Pereira (Col) 1 (An. Rodriguez 81)
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Gil 24 pen)

Apr 6 – Maturin
Monagas (Ven) 0
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0

Apr 18 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 2 (Advincula 89, Varela 90+9)
Deportivo Pereira (Col) 0

Apr 19 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Palacios 45+6)
Monagas (Ven) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Colo-Colo	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Boca Juniors	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Deportivo Pereira	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Monagas	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

Group G

Apr 4 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 0
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 0

Apr 6 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0
Libertad (Par) 1 (Gomez 9)

Apr 18 – Curitiba
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 2 (Vitor Roque 7, Terans 35 pen)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Paulinho 70)

Apr 20 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 1 (Cardozo 90+4 pen)
Alianza Lima (Per) 2 (Rodriguez 46, Sabbag 71)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alianza Lima	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Ath Paranaense	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Libertad	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Atletico Mineiro	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group H

Apr 5 – Santa Fe
Patronato (Arg) 1 (Levato 2)
Atletico Nacional (Col) 2 (Pabon 77 pen, 79)

Apr 6 – Arequipa
Melgar (Per) 1 (Cuesta 20)
Olimpia (Par) 1 (Paiva 14)

Apr 18 – Asuncion
Olimpia (Par) 1 (Cardozo 44)
Patronato (Arg) 0

Apr 20 – Medellin
Atletico Nacional (Col) 3 (Pabon 28, 38 pen, 59)
Melgar (Per) 1 (Iberico 57)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Nacional	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Olimpia	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Melgar	2	0	1	1	2	4	1
Patronato	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

• *All Copa Libertadores group standings are correct up to the conclusion of matchday two*

2023 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Group Stage

Group A

Apr 4 – Trujillo
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 1 (Velez 70)
LDU (Ecu) 2 (Alzugaray 52, Anangono 90+6)

Apr 6 – Rancagua
Magallanes (Chi) 2 (Canales 16, Contreras 75)
Botafogo (Bra) 2 (Tiquinho Soares 6, Carlos Eduardo 58)

Apr 19 – Quito
LDU (Ecu) 4 (Angulo 53, 55, Martinez 86, Pinero 89 og)
Magallanes (Chi) 0

Apr 20 – Rio deJaneiro
Botafogo (Bra) 4 (Victor Sa 14, Tiquinho Soares 45+3 pen, Carlos Eduardo 57, Tche Tche 73 pen)
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
LDU	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Botafogo	2	1	1	0	6	2	4
Magallanes	2	0	1	1	2	6	1
U Cesar Vallejo	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

Group B

Apr 5 – Montevideo
Danubio (Uru) 2 (Milan 5, May 90)
Emelec (Ecu) 0

Apr 6 – Buenos Aires
Huracan (Arg) 4 (Hezze 14, Castro 35, Lujan 84, Garro 90)
Guarani (Par) 1 (Santander 18)

Apr 19 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 2 (Santander 68 pen, Barcelo 76)
Danubio (Uru) 1 (May 42)

Apr 20 – Guayaquil
Emelec (Ecu) 1 (Fara 17)
Huracan (Arg) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Huracan	2	1	0	1	4	2	3
Danubio	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Emelec	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Guarani	2	1	0	1	3	5	3

Group C

Apr 5 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Oriente Petrolero (Bol) 0
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Godoy 63)

Apr 6 – Asuncion
Tacuary (Par) 1 (Edson Carius 22)
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 4 (Juninho Capixaba 39, Alerrandro 49, Talisson 62, Gustavinho 77)

Apr 18 – Braganca Paulista
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 5 (Helinho 5, Aderlan 15, Eduardo Sasha 33 pen, Gustavinho 62, Sorriso 90+6)
Oriente Petrolero (Bol) 0

Apr 18 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 4 (Piatti 63, Nunez 71, Mancuso 81, Carrillo 90+4)
Tacuary (Par) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RB Bragantino	2	2	0	0	9	1	6
Estudiantes	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Oriente Petrolero	2	0	0	2	0	6	0
Tacuary	2	0	0	2	1	8	0

Group D

Apr 6 – Valencia
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 0
Tolima (Col) 2 (Herazo 45+5, Guzman 56 pen)

Apr 6 – Victoria
Tigre (Arg) 0
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Erison 57, 74)

Apr 18 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Marcos Paulo 86, Araujo 88)
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 0

Apr 20 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 1 (Bone 59)
Tigre (Arg) 2 (Colidio 66, Badaloni 78)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sao Paulo	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Tolima	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Tigre	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
A Puerto Cabello	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group E

Apr 4 – Rancagua
Audax Italiano (Chi) 0
Newell's Old Boys (Arg) 1 (Aguirre 90+4)

Apr 4 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Blooming (Bol) 0
Santos (Bra) 1 (Bauermann 90+8)

Apr 18 – Rosario
Newell's Old Boys (Arg) 3 (Portillo 27, 62, Reasco 45)
Blooming (Bol) 0

Apr 20 – Santos
Santos (Bra) 0
Audax Italiano (Chi) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Newell's Old Boys	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Santos	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Audax Italiano	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Blooming	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group F

Apr 4 – Bogota
Millonarios (Col) 3 (Castro 59 pen, 69, Silva 72)
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 0

Apr 5 – Belo Horizonte
America Mineiro (Bra) 4 (Eder 3 Mastriani 6, 56, Wellington Paulista 68)
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Mansilla 76)

Apr 19 – Florencio Varela
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 2 (Lopez 49, Soto 51)
America Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Lucas Kal 63)

Apr 20 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 0
Millonarios (Col) 2 (Perlaza 54, Cortes 65)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Millonarios	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
America Mineiro	2	1	0	1	5	3	3
Defensa y Justicia	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Penarol	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

Group G

Apr 4 – Goiania
Goias (Bra) 0
Santa Fe (Col) 0

Apr 5 – La Plata
Gimnasia y Esgrima (Arg) 0
Universitario (Per) 1 (Succar 85 pen)

Apr 18 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) 2 (Mantilla 57, Rodallega 90+6)
Gimnasia y Esgrima (Arg) 1 (Lescano 41)

Apr 20 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 2 (Riveros 87, Valera 90+6)
Goias (Bra) 2 (Morelli 57, Maguinho 65)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Santa Fe	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Goias	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Gimnasia y Esgrima	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group H

Apr 4 – Meridoa
Estudiantes de Merida (Ven) 0
San Lorenzo (Arg) 1 (Gattoni 33)

Apr 5 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 4 (Thiago Galhardo 4, Pochettino 75, 90+4, Lucero 90+1)
Palestino (Chi) 0

Apr 18 – Rancagua
Palestino (Chi) 1 (Davila 53)
Estudiantes de Merida (Ven) 0

Apr 20 – Buenos Aires
San Lorenzo (Arg) 0
Fortaleza (Bra) 2 (Batalla 90 og, Guilherme 90+2)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fortaleza	2	2	0	0	6	0	6
San Lorenzo	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Palestino	2	1	0	1	1	4	3
Estudiantes de Merida	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

• *All Copa Sudamericana group standings are correct up to the conclusion of matchday two*

CONCACAF

2023 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Legs

Apr 4 – Leon
Leon (Mex) 5 (Mena 8, Davila 66, 84, Di Yorio 90+1, E. Hernandez 90+4)
Violette (Hai) 0

Apr 4 – Chester
Philadelphia Union (USA) 1 (Gazdag 89 pen)
Atlas (Mex) 0

Apr 5 – San Pedro Sula
Motagua (Hon) 0
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Quinones 44)

Apr 5 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 0
LAFC (USA) 3 (Bouanga 56, 65, Opoku 61)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Legs

Apr 11 – Santiago
Violette (Hai) 2 (Chery 15, 26)
Leon (Mex) 1 (Rubi 30 pen)
Leon win 6-2 on aggregate

Apr 11 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 3 (Vela 8, 31, Cifuentes 65)
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 0
LAFC win 6-0 on aggregate

Apr 12 – Guadalajara
Atlas (Mex) 2 (Quinones 11, Furch 45+)
Philadelphia Union (USA) 2 (Carranza 27, 78)
Philadelphia Union win 3-2 on aggregate

Apr 13 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 5 (Gignac 27, 66, Quinones 83, Angulo 88, Ibanez 90)
Motagua (Hon) 0
Tigres UANL win 6-0 on aggregate

BERMUDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pembroke Hamilton (C)	18	15	0	3	66	17	45
Devonshire Cougars	18	13	3	2	50	17	42
St George's Colts	18	12	1	5	55	24	37
North Village Rams	18	11	4	3	38	16	37
Hamilton Parish	18	7	4	7	32	30	25
Dandy Town Hornets	18	7	2	9	23	32	23
X-Roads Warriors	18	6	2	10	33	49	20
Somerset Trojans	18	5	2	11	23	43	17
Boulevard Blazers (R)	18	3	3	12	23	58	12
Robin Hood (R)	18	0	1	17	10	67	1

AFRICA

2022-23 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Apr 1 – Casablanca
Wydad (Mar) 3 (Sambou 38, 51, El Moutaraji 87)
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0

Apr 1 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 1 (Jaredi 15)
AS Vita (Cod) 0

Final standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wydad (Q)	6	4	1	1	7	1	13
JS Kabylie (Q)	6	3	1	2	4	5	10
Petro Atletico	6	2	1	3	3	5	7
AS Vita	6	1	1	4	3	6	4

Group B

Apr 1 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 3 (Kahraba 25, El Shahat 64, 81)
Al Hilal (Sdn) 0

Apr 1 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Mekong 43 og, Nassir 86)
Coton Sport (Cmr) 1 (Kasali 90+5)

Final standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi S (Q)	6	4	2	0	14	7	14
Al Ahly (Q)	6	3	1	2	14	8	10
Al Hilal	6	3	1	2	6	6	10
Coton Sport	6	0	0	6	3	16	0

Group C

Mar 31 – Casablanca
Raja (Mar) 3 (Khabba 44, 70 pen, Boulacsoute 86)
Simba (Tan) 1 (Othos 48)

Apr 1 – Bamaki
Horoya (Gui) 2 (Barry 11, Traore 90+3)
Vipers (Uga) 0

Final standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Raja (Q)	6	5	1	0	17	3	16
Simba (Q)	6	3	0	3	10	7	9
Horoya	6	2	1	3	4	12	7
Vipers	6	0	2	4	1	10	3

Group D

Mar 31 – Cairo
Zamalek (Egy) 4 (Shalaby 1, Mansi 3, 64, 90+4)
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 3 (Agab 7, Nouh 48, Sergio 56)

Apr 1 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 0
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 0

Final standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esperance (Q)	6	3	2	1	6	4	11
CR Belouizdad (Q)	6	3	1	2	4	2	10
Zamalek	6	2	1	3	7	9	7
Al Merrikh	6	1	2	3	5	7	5

Knockout Round Draw

Quarter-Finals

Simba (Tan) v Wydad (Mar); Al Ahly (Egy) v Raja (Mar); CR Belouizdad (Alg) v Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA); JS Kabylie (Alg) v Esperance (Tun)

Semi-Finals

JS Kabylie (Alg)/Esperance (Tun) v Al Ahly (Egy)/ Raja (Mar); Simba (Tan)/Wydad (Mar) v CR Belouizdad (Alg)/Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA)

2022-23 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Apr 2 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 4 (Belaid 9 pen, Alilet 20 pen, 75, Mahious 36)
Al Akhdar (Lby) 1 (Shafsuhuf 65)

Apr 2 – Johannesburg
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 3 (Sibeko 70, Chivaviro 73, Mosemaedi 75)
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 2 (Kateregga 23, Mwaku 45)

Final standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Marumo G (Q)	6	4	0	2	12	10	12
USM Alger (Q)	6	3	2	1	11	5	11
SE Lupopo	6	1	2	3	6	10	5
Al Akhdar	6	1	2	3	8	12	5

Group B

Apr 2 – Yamoussoukro
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 1 (Karidioula 2)
Rivers United (Nga) 0

Apr 2 – Brazzaville
Diables Noirs (Cgo) 0
Motema Pembe (Cod) 0

Final standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASEC Abidjan (Q)	6	4	1	1	6	4	13
Rivers Utd (Q)	6	3	1	2	9	7	10
Diables Noirs	6	1	3	2	5	5	6
Motema Pembe	6	0	3	3	2	6	3

Group C

Apr 2 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 2 (Gabr 15, El Said 52)
Future (Egy) 1 (Atef 90+3)

Apr 2 – Lome
ASKO Kara (Tog) 1 (Yere 24)
ASFAR (Mar) 1 (Diney 40)

Final standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASFAR (Q)	6	3	2	1	11	6	11
Pyramids (Q)	6	3	2	1	10	6	11
Future	6	3	1	2	10	5	10
ASKO Kara	6	0	1	5	3	17	1

Group D

Apr 2 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0
Young Africans (Tan) 1 (Mussa 63)

Apr 2 – Tunis
US Monastir (Tun) 2 (Harrabi 35, Amokrane 90+3)
Real Bamako (Mli) 1 (Samabaly 44)

Final standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Young Africans (Q)	6	4	1	1	9	4	13
US Monastir (Q)	6	4	1	1	8	4	13
Real Bamako	6	1	2	3	6	10	5
TP Mazembe	6	1	0	5	5	10	3

Knockout Round Draw

Quarter-Finals

Pyramids (Egy) v Marumo Gallants (RSA); US Monastir (Tun) v ASEC Abidjan (Civ); USM Alger (Alg) v ASFAR (Mar); Rivers United (Nga) v Young Africans (Tan)

Semi-Finals

Rivers United (Nga)/Young Africans (Tan) v Pyramids (Egy)/Marumo Gallants (RSA); US Monastir (Tun)/ASEC Abidjan (Civ) v USM Alger (Alg)/ASFAR (Mar)

ARABIA

2023 KING SALMAN CLUB CUP

First Preliminary Qualifying Round

Mar 2 – Jeddah
Arta Solar 7 (Dji) 2 (Kalou 6, Akinbinu 86)
Volcan Club (Com) 0

Mar 2 – Jeddah
Fahman (Yem) 3 (Alratil 34, Rajeh 38, Mahdi 90)
Horseed FC (Som) 0

Preliminary Qualifying Play-Off Round

Mar 5 – Jeddah
Arta Solar 7 (Dji) 1 (Traore 45)
Fahman (Yem) 2 (Awad 42, 76)

First Qualifying Round – 1st Legs

Mar 13 – Basra
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 1 (Nabeel 38)
Al Shabab (KSA) 1 (Boupendza 69)

Mar 13 – Omdurman
Al Hilal (Sdn) 3 (Ngoma 77, Lilepo 87, Abdelrahman 90+3)
Manama Club (Bhr) 0

Mar 14 – Muharraq
Al Muharraq (Bhr) 2 (Arboleda 21, Ogbi 44 pen)
Al Seeb (Oma) 0

Mar 15 – Rabat
ASFAR (Mar) 4 (Sahd 14, Ennafati 51, Guede Gnadou 63, Hamoudan 82)
Al Ittihad Tripoli (Lby) 1 (Eisa 77)

Mar 15 – Nouakchott
FC Nouadhibou (Mtn) 4 (Tanjy 17, 82, Faye 49, 52)
Shabab Al Ordon (Jor) 1 (Alrialat 2)

Mar 15 – Kuwait City
Kuwait SC (Kuw) 1 (Marhoon 60)
JS Saoura (Alg) 0

Apr 1 – Al Buraimi
Al Nahda (Oma) 2 (Camara 13, Al Maliki 72)
Shabab Al Khalil (Ple) 0

Apr 3 – Sfax
CS Sfaxien (Tun) 0
Qatar SC (Qat) 0

Apr 4 – Abu Dhabi
Bourj FC (Lbn) 0
Al Wahda (UAE) 3 (Zouhir 16, Pereira 29, Al Karbi 35)

Apr 4 – Cairo
Tala'ea El-Gaish (Egy) 1 (Tarek 21)
Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 2 (El Monir 54, Maatouk 89)

Apr 5 – Riyadh
Fahman (Yem) 0
US Monastir (Tun) 4 (Traore 36, 60, Mhirsi 71, 77)

Apr 7 – Jeddah
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 2 (Nouh 29, Sergio 33)
Tishreen (Syr) 1 (Al Mohamad 13)

First Qualifying Round – 2nd Legs

Mar 21 – Oran
JS Saoura (Alg) 1 (Doucene 76)
Kuwait SC (Kuw) 1 (Khenissi 64)
Kuwait SC win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 4 – Muscat
Al Seeb (Oma) 2 (Al Muqbali 43, 79)
Al Muharraq (Bhr) 0
2-2 on aggregate. Al Muharraq win 5-4 on pens

Apr 8 – Abu Dhabi
Al Wahda (UAE) 1 (Allan 90+6)
Bourj FC (Lbn) 0
Al Wahda win 4-0 on aggregate

Apr 10 – Isa Town
Manama Club (Bhr) 2 (Moosa 33 pen, Al Khatal 37)
Al Hilal (Sdn) 1 (Abagna 23)
Al Hilal win 4-2 on aggregate

Apr 11 – Doha
Qatar SC (Qat) 1 (Pastore 90)
CS Sfaxien (Tun) 1 (Kante 41)
1-1 on aggregate. CS Sfaxien win on away goals

Apr 11 – Riyadh
Tishreen (Syr) 1 (Al Mohamad 13)
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 0
2-2 on aggregate. Tishreen win on away goals

Apr 11 – Benghazi
Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 1 (Anis Salto 64)
Tala'ea El-Gaish (Egy) 1 (Paul Julius 20)
Al Ahli Tripoli win 3-2 on aggregate

Apr 11 – Amman
Shabab Al Khalil (Ple) 0
Al Nahda (Oma) 3
Al Nahda awarded a 3-0 walkover and win 5-0 on aggregate

Apr 12 – Irbid
Shabab Al Ordon (Jor) 1 (Obaid 44)
FC Nouadhibou (Mtn) 0
FC Nouadhibou win 4-2 on aggregate

Apr 12 – Benghazi
Al Ittihad Tripoli (Lby) 3 (Mihri 9, 35, 83)
ASFAR (Mar) 1 (Sahd 43)
ASFAR win 5-4 on aggregate

Apr 12 – Monastir
US Monastir (Tun) 2 (Aloui 52, Jaffali 64)
Fahman (Yem) 0
US Monastir win 6-0 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Riyadh
Al Shabab (KSA) 4 (Boupendza 19, Banega 73, Al Tambakti 80, Guanca 90+1)
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 0
Al Shabab win 5-1 on aggregate

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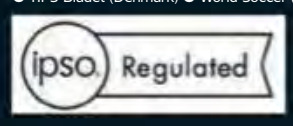


Dusan Tadic

Real Madrid 1 Ajax 4

2018-19 Champions League round of 16, Bernabeu, Madrid

On a magical Champions League night in Madrid in March 2019, Ajax tore defending champions Real Madrid apart. With two assists and a goal, the star of the show was Dusan Tadic, playing in his first-ever Champions League knockout tie just months after leaving Southampton for the Dutch giants...

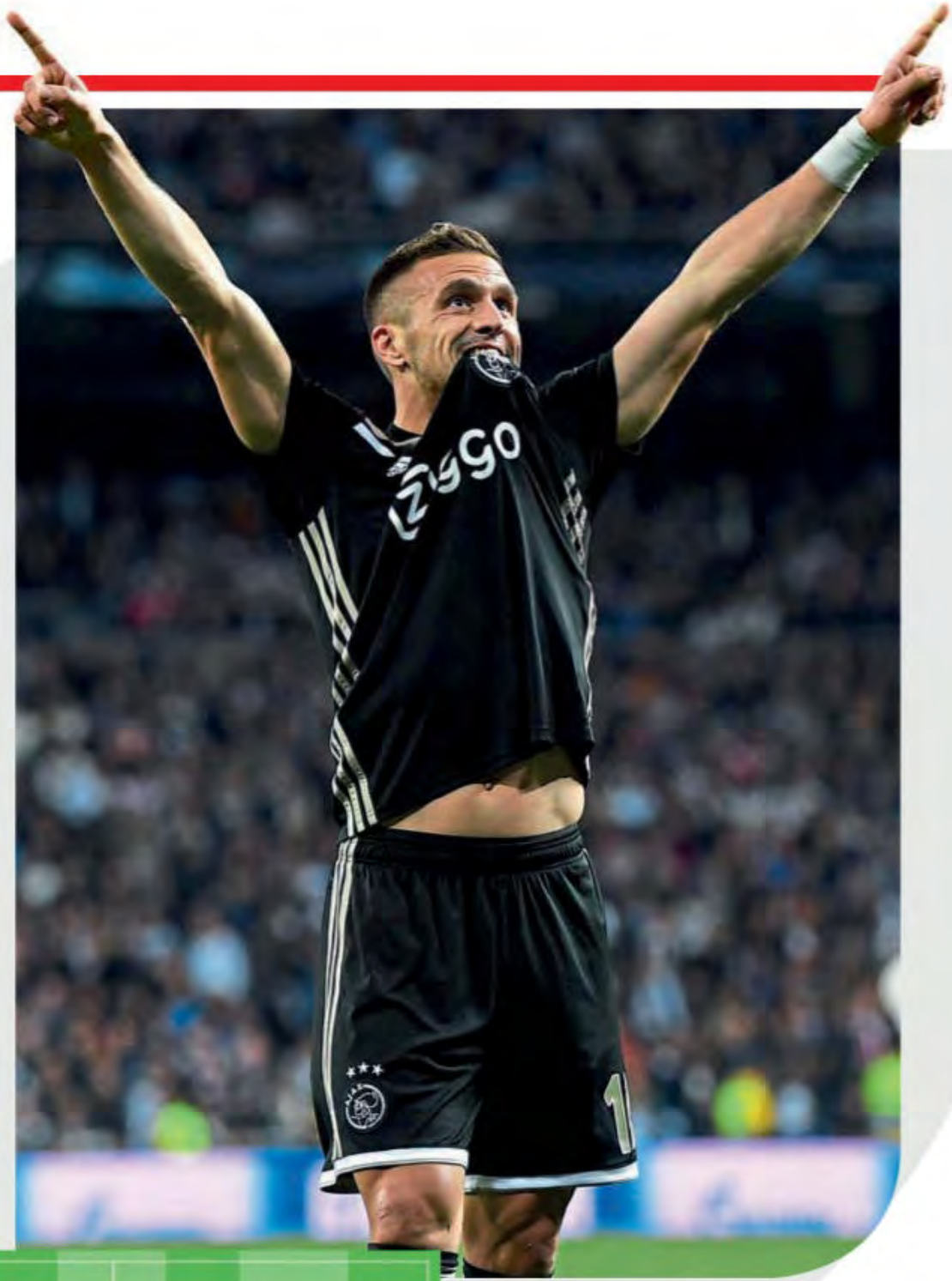
"We went to Madrid after a 2-1 defeat in the first leg at home, but we had the feeling that nothing was decided yet. Whoever watched the first game could see that we were the better side and that we deserved more; at least a draw.

One thing was really puzzling in that game. It was when Sergio Ramos, late in the game, obviously deliberately picked up a yellow card. I was genuinely surprised about his move. Apparently he was sure that Real had finished the job and he planned to be without yellow cards for the quarter-finals. Of course we talked about it later in the dressing room. And perhaps deep inside of us it was an additional motivation for the return leg. It was like, "now we'll show you".

What happened on that night in Madrid was good, really good. Not only how I played but the performance of the whole team. Everything against Real Madrid has a ten times bigger value, even if it had been a friendly game, let alone a knockout match in the Champions League. Ajax are certainly a big club, a great club. But Real Madrid are the greatest club in the world.

I think we played tactically clever, we had a bigger desire to win and in the end it was a deserved victory for us. Our game plan was as ever in that season: to play attacking football and to dominate. I also think that our style of play didn't suit Real. All of us really believed that we could turn things around, that we could go through.

We had the perfect start, taking a 2-0 lead after 20 minutes. After the game there was a lot of talk about my move before the second goal, but all I can say about it was that it happened spontaneously. It happened in a split second and it helped to shake off the opposition player and to continue the move for our second goal.



Magical night...Tadic celebrates the historic win

For our third goal, [Donny] Van de Beek played the ball to me on the edge of the box, with my first touch I made room for a shot and hit the ball into the top corner.

In spite of the 3-0 lead, we didn't celebrate too much. We kept full concentration as we knew that Real could always come back. Indeed they managed to reduce the score, but then we quickly scored again to make it 4-1 and that was it.

It was a special game for me because as a kid my two favourite clubs were Real Madrid and Ajax. Of course the memories of that night in Madrid I will keep forever, but I also know that it's inevitable that when I think back to that game, it automatically reminds me of how close we came to reaching the Champions League final that season. Sadly, we didn't make it."

> "Everything against Real Madrid has a ten times bigger value, even if it had been a friendly game, let alone a knockout match in the Champions League"

Decisive...Tadic scores Ajax's third goal on the night

Interview by Vladimir Novak

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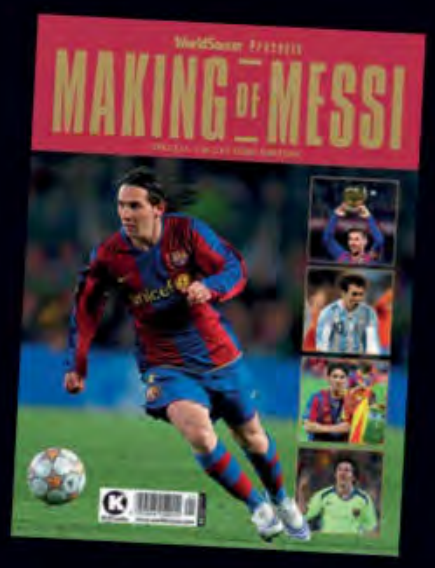

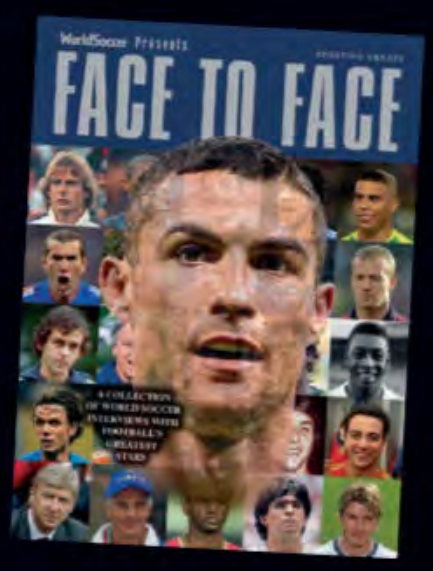

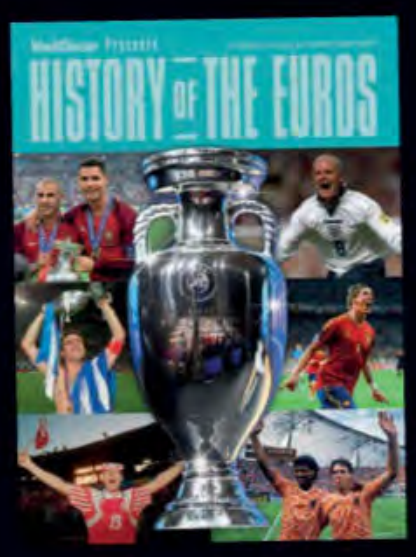

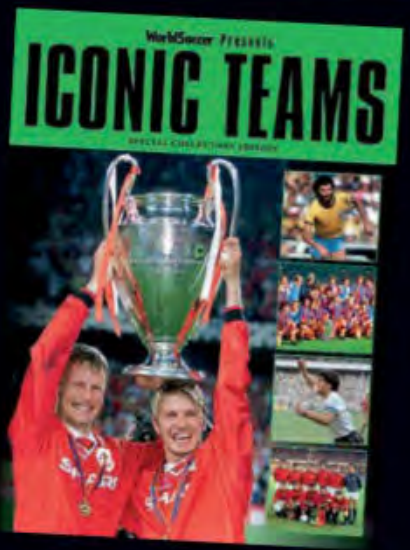

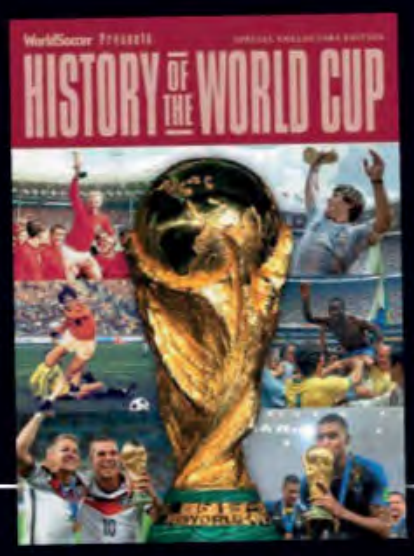

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